

Stumbling upon 'Digital Humanities Down Under'

The Digital Humanities Research Group, founded in 2013 at the Western Sydney University hosts an annual Digital Humanities Workshop called Digital Humanities Down Under. Through the generosity of the School of Creative Industries at UniSA, I was lucky enough to attend the 2017 Workshop. For those of you who know very little about the digital humanities and for of you who already know much more, I would highly recommend it. The intensive sessions can be chosen according to interest and on offer are introductory sessions about what the digital humanities and what its strengths are all the way through to advanced coding, with exposure to innovative interdisciplinary examples of research and teaching projects along the way.

As an academic and humanities scholar who has long dabbled in the digital without knowing exactly what the digital humanities was, I found myself in very good company. At the workshop I found myself one of a motley crew of academics teachers and researchers, students, librarians and members of state governments – from as far afield as the Visual Arts, Maths, Media and Cultural Studies, Economics, Engineering, Computing, Linguistics, Sociology, Indigenous Studies and Literary Studies. All were drawn together by with an interest in the using the digital in some way either for teaching or the visual presentation of their (qualitative or quantitative) data in a humanities context.

The workshop was organised into streams with titles like: 'linked data, digital ethnography and social network mapping and analysis, coding and intro to programming' and as the week progressed these began to gather meaning for me as colleagues from the University of Newcastle, the Australian National University, and the University of Victoria in Canada began to explain their work in the digital humanities. I learnt that it is easier than I thought to write bits of HTML code in order to get one's data to be displayed in a more visually striking way. But I also learnt that free visualisation software such as Gephi is already there to use to make scatter plots, graphs and networks out of our social science data that not only looks prettier than a table or questionnaire code but enables us to make connections between data points when it is displayed in this way, that we would just not have been able to do before.

We heard about projects that used digital software to: display data with animated graphs (see Fig 1 below), to create virtual reality immersive experiences of research findings (see Fig 2 below) and to visually map the incidences of phenomena across the globe (see Fig 3 below).

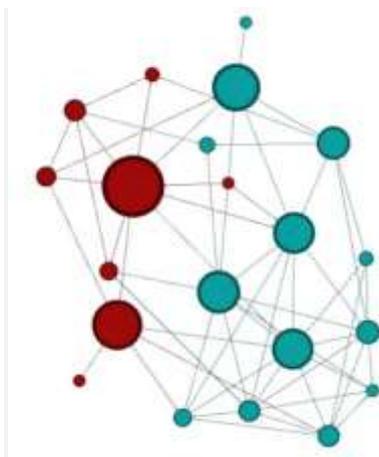


Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3

One of the project's presented at the workshop that probably dovetailed best with my own research and teaching interests in visual culture and mobile learning was some work of Dr Jenna Condie. She is a critical, social psychologist and qualitative digital research methods lecturer at the Western Sydney University who is using location-aware mobile apps (such as the Tinder dating app) to track the movement and interactions of people along the Arab-Israeli Border. As she says "when the 'field' is an app on your phone that is in your hand"... "every place else you go, the rules of research need rewriting" (Condie 2017, n.p.). This workshop considered the theoretical, methodological, and ethical implications of using location-aware mobile dating apps in research.

Researchers and teachers in Linguists, Literary Studies and Literary Historians were also strikingly visible – they seem to have used the digital humanities as a place to remake themselves and claim and map new territory in their fields. One such person was the presenter Prof Ray Siemens, a literary scholar with wide-ranging expertise in English renaissance texts, but who combines this know-how with an extensive repertoire of digital research methods. He is Distinguished Professor in English in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Victoria In Canada and holds a cross appointment in Computer Science. This is the kind of crossing of discipline boundaries that the digital humanities makes possible. He also heads up the Electronic Textual Cultures Lab (<http://etcl.uvic.ca/>). This active research group is full of reinvented medievalists who use innovative digital methods in their research and teaching. An example of one of their projects is the digitisation of early printed books, and documents that existed only in single or few copies and which have now been scanned for archival purposes but also for access to the materials that might not otherwise have been possible. At the workshop, Prof Siemens' presentation was entitled 'Understanding and engaging knowledge in a social context' and in it he introduced us to a useful way of mapping the methodological commons used across disparate disciplines in the humanities to enable rigorous and creative inter disciplinarily. If you have a look at his diagram in Fig 4. below you will see that the digital humanities approach makes all kinds of data more readable and accessible to those not having specific and often technical disciplinary expertise. This palpably supports scholars from many different disciplines being able to access and interpret a far larger and more disparate data pool and to use their disciplinary expertise to work on it together. This is because through the digital humanities people are really able to see other people's data and link it to their own, leading to new and fruitful associations and collaborations.

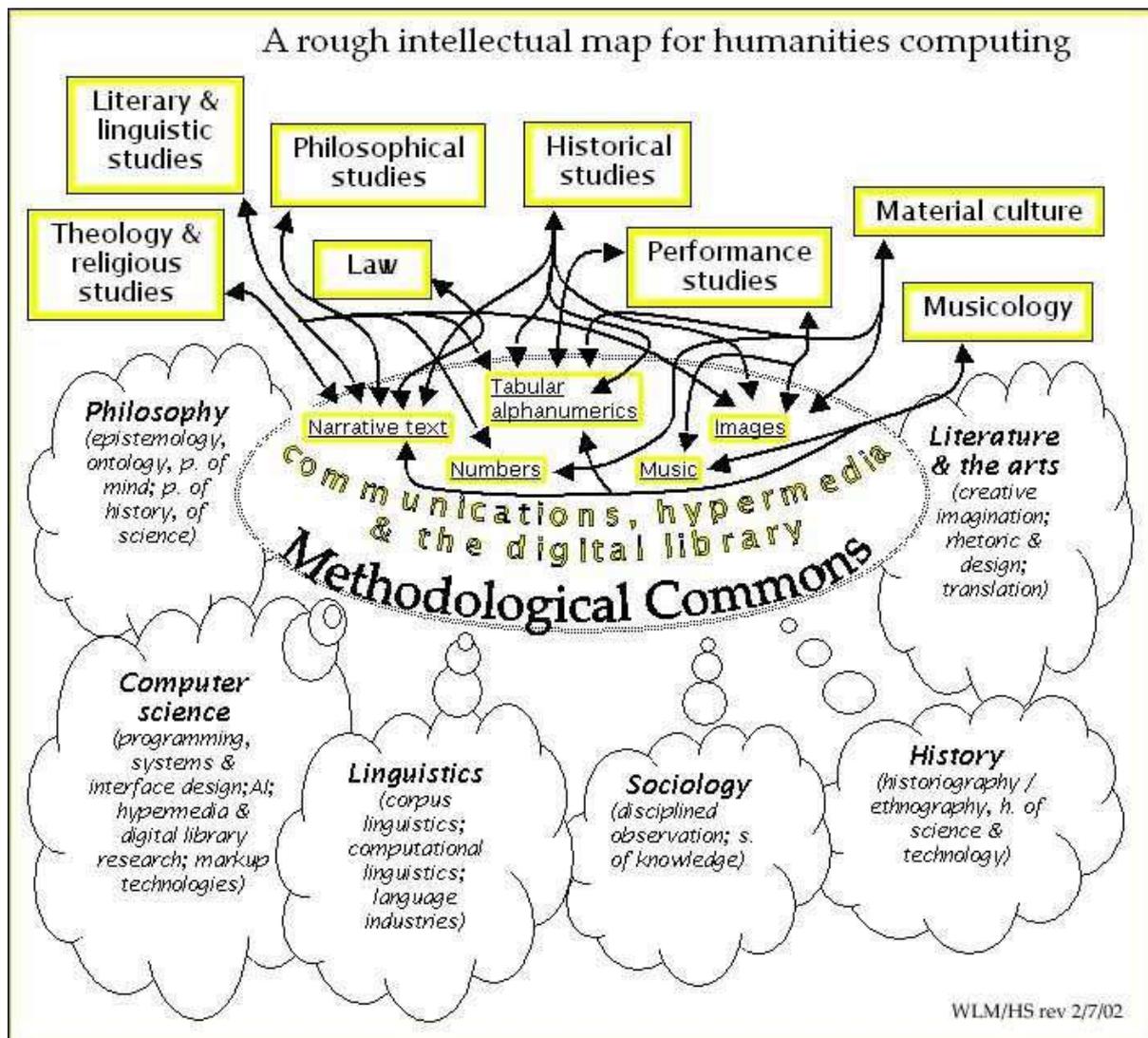


Fig 4

Whilst the digital humanities started out sounding like an oxymoron to me, after the workshop I was left with a profound sense of a space where old things have been taken apart and put back together in a new way that really propels the boundaries of knowledge in the humanities beyond where they could have gone before.

In the digital humanities, the strength of the humanities in thinking through meta approaches, critically analysing research questions and including values of social justice is brought to bear upon detailed data sets that are then able to be used and re-used by different people, in different projects in service of truly trans disciplinary knowledge building

Although the Western Sydney University is most active in this space through its presence in the Digital Humanities research group who host this workshop, UniSA is also powering ahead in this space, so now might be a great time to join in if you have not done this already. The inclusive and open approach that the digital humanities currently provides to support the work of one's colleagues whilst also linking one's own work to theirs is also thoroughly appealing. That is one of the reasons why I have tried to showcase the names and projects of colleagues working in this space.

Dr Rachel Hendery, a linguist and the first ever lecturer in digital humanities in Australia was one of the organisers of 'DH down under' and she was also recently a keynote speaker at the DH Symposium 'Ways of seeing: critical, digital, spatial symposium & exhibition' organised by Dr Julie Nichols - an architect specialising in urban history, theory and design - from UniSA AAD that was held in February this year. As you know, UniSA will be hosting another DH conference, the Australasian Association for Digital Humanities, DHA 2018, which will take place at UniSA CW on 25 – 28 September 2018. You also probably already know about our very own Ben Stubbs' work in the digital humanities, teaching his students to make virtual reality narratives. A list of people involved in DH at UniSA is evolving and is included at the end of the blog to help provide colleagues further points of contact in the digital humanities.

For me this workshop opened up the digital humanities space as a place where my own teaching and research interests might be stream-lined as I design location-based-mobile-learning-games for my students and as I continue to analyse and interpret images in my studies of visual research methods and visual culture. Questions that the workshop stimulated and that I walked away with are how the emphasis on the visual can be broadened to include those robust parts of our realities in the humanities that are *not* seen. I also wondered whether this can be done, in part by configuring the visual in such a way as to also evoke our other senses and so help us continue to do better what the humanities does well, share new visions and virtually reach out and touch the experiences of others.

Evolving list of people with an interest in or involved in DH at UniSA

Joanne Cys; Julie Collins; Jane Andrew; Diana Hodge; Adrian Franklin; Brad West; Jeanne-Marie Viljoen; Jason Bainbridge; Andrew Thomson; Ruth Bridgstock; Liz Hounslow; Susan Luckman; Susan Nichols; James Wilson; Darren Fong; Rachel Hurst; Diana Newport-Peace; Matthias Schlesewsky; Rana Moustafa; Kathleen Connellan; Jim Moss; Ian Gwilt; Denise Meredyth; Ben Stubbs ; Josh McCarthy ; Alison Gwilt ; Mads Gaardboe ; Rachel Hurst ; Stephen Ward ;Stephen James Nova; Chris Brisbin; Angeliqne Edmonds; Katica Pedisic ; Sean Pickersgill; Jasmine Palmer; Jane Lawrence;Kam Kaur ; Wei-Jung Hsu; Chris Burns