Case Study: Digital History

James Perry | james.perry@lancaster.ac.uk | PhD Candidate | History Department |
Academic Supervisor: Professor Ian Gregory

Project Overview;
Within the department there is a growing desire to ensure that History at Lancaster University keeps apace with the implementation of digital resources and methods within academic research. As such, the introduction of new technologies, resources, and methodologies is becoming an important component in both academic research and student recruitment. This project aimed to develop some of the existing ideas about how the history department can better adapt to, and incorporate the 'Digital Turn'.

Identifying the Skills Gap
The first step in this project was in identifying the skills gap within the department. Currently, there was a tendency for the clustering of skills amongst a few persons, with most staff and students finding themselves being uncomfortable with learning new pieces of software.

The first step in identifying the skills gap started with one-on-one discussions with various members of staff and students, these informal discussions enabled me to get a better idea of what people were working on, but also to identify how they might best benefit from being introduced to digital research skills.

The second stage was attendance at Staff Student Consultation meetings, these meetings enabled me to identify upcoming modules that were being introduced, as well as to enter discussions with representatives of different student years to discuss what they felt their students would be interested in.

Finally, I had a meeting with the Head of Department and Head of Postgraduate studies, in this meeting we discussed scope for future training, as well as adapting to the demands for increased digital skills training for historians. This meeting provided a broader introduction to departmental directions and allowed me to gauge an appropriate way to get started with upskilling both students and staff.

For other departments seeking to identify skill gaps, I would reiterate the importance of one-on-one discussions, although they take time, they enable a deeper understanding of what, why, and how others in the department can develop their skills base. It is important to note that in many of these discussions it was possible to inform others about particular technologies and pieces of software that could be of value to them. In many ways, this was one of the most important aspects as it generated an excitement for both staff and students when they found out that they could save considerable amounts of time, or that a piece of software could enrich their research methodology. With that said, I did not utilise any online polls or questionnaires, however, this might work for some departments.

<u>Skills Needed for Staff and Students</u>

1. What skills do students need to be successful in digital humanities?

For a student wanting to be successful in the digital humanities, an important factor is the willingness to develop new skills. Digital humanities can often be uncomfortable, not least because it forces a person to push their skills to the limit, and to invest time in learning new software and methodological approaches. A strong analytical background will also enable a student to adapt well to a new methodological approach to historical research. A key skill for students seeking to be successful in digital humanities is the ability to get familiar with new technologies quickly, this is a sought after skill.
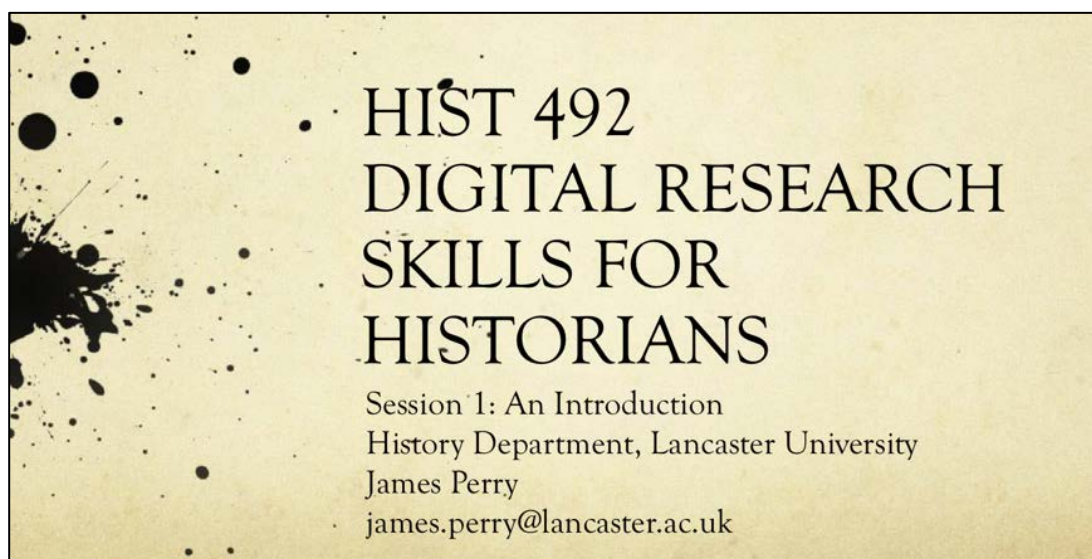
2. What skills do staff need to be successful in digital humanities?

When attempting to become proficient in, and successful in digital humanities, staff members have to approach the subject with a detailed plan. Without the luxury of much time to learn new software, members of staff need to be smart in their decisions and choice of software to learn. Patience and persistence might be the order of the day to gradually develop skills. Many of the traditional research skills staff members might have can be easily transferred across to the digital humanities, but the key skill that needs to be developed is recognising how new methodologies can augment or reframe their methodological approach. Seeking to become proficient in a piece of software for the sake of it can be unproductive and should fall within an existing research strategy.

<u>Summary of Activities</u>;

Guided Study Sessions

➔ Five skills sessions were developed and delivered to a small group of Masters Students which enabled them to gain skills in Microsoft Excel and Access. These sessions were well received and students have reported utilising the skills and experience by mentioning it in job applications. The skills revolved around data manipulation, statistical analysis, and data visualisation.

➔ The organisation and construction of these guided study sessions took a considerable amount of time, in addition to the development of worksheets and handouts; it required careful step by step planning for how students would develop the intended quantitative analytical skills.

HIST 492
DIGITAL RESEARCH
SKILLS FOR
HISTORIANS

Session 1: An Introduction
History Department, Lancaster University
James Perry
james.perry@lancaster.ac.uk

Departmental skills workshops
- ➜ Two workshops were held within the department for students and staff and were well attended. The workshops were also attractive to other departments and a team from the English department attended to develop skills with geo-spatial software. The workshops ran for one morning and an afternoon, and ranged in attendance ranging from 5-10 in each session. Each workshop began with an introduction and went on to provide a guided activity, before then spending time working with staff and students and their data.
- ➜ These departmental skills workshops benefited from having smaller numbers, as they enabled a more personal interaction to take place, further, it meant they could be adapted for the needs of the group present.
- ➜ One challenge was that there was no telling who was going to show up, this meant it could be very busy or completely empty, depending on who showed up. Being able to know the audience would have been useful when planning and could have led to more structured meetings, nonetheless, it worked well and enabled points of collaboration between different attendees and broadened their awareness with regards to what they can go on to do.

Digital history webinar
- ➜ A webinar hosted on Google Hangout was broadcast on 27 April 2016. Professor Ian Gregory, Professor Anne Knowles, and Dr Katrina Navickas spoke on the webinar about their research. The webinar was an ideal opportunity for those looking to develop skills, gain ideals, or develop a better understanding of digital history and how it can be approached. The webinar video was then hosted on Youtube and is available for public viewing.
- ➜ One of the key difficulties was in having to co-ordinate with a number of very busy academics. However, the webinar ended up going very smoothly and has resulted in

being one of the most productive elements, and has established further connections with other international universities.

➔ The hosting of a webinar has been useful for both providing useful insights and for advertising the skills and direction that the department is headed.

Establishment of Digital Humanities web hub

➔ The Digital Humanities web space was established and is now ready for population with materials ready for the new academic year (http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/dh/). The website will serve as an outward facing space to advertise and promote the skills, activities, and opportunities available within the department.

➔ Within this site, a host of materials and resources will be added for those seeking to engage with and develop digital research skills. Events, including training workshops, will be advertised and promoted to an external, international audience.

➔ A Wordpress website was chosen as it enabled a team to easily manage and update it, and is fitting considering the digital humanities scholars at Lancaster have a number of other sites that run off the same style. (For example see *Spatial Humanities*, http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/projects/spatialhum.wordpress/, and *Lakes Deep Map*, http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/lakesdeepmap/).

➔ One of the key difficulties in developing a web space was the process whereby it had to pass through the departmental representative for web spaces, this meant when he was away for an extended period, it was nearly impossible to get movement on the development of the site. This was another key reason why a Wordpress site was seen as more conducive for the department given there is an increasing number of persons with these skills.

Aims;
Further to the wider effort to promote and develop digital humanities at Lancaster, there are some additional aims that we sought to achieve. They are;

1). To scope out and test the existing I.T. facilities and resources available for the proposed MA in Digital Humanities provisionally scheduled for a 2017/2018 start.

2). To encourage participation and engagement with Digital resources and methodologies amongst both staff and students in practical workshops.

3). To build connections between the history department, and the wider international Digital History community.

The activities for this project enabled these aims to be met, we used different computer spaces which helped assess ideal teaching spaces, there was also an assessment of the software available for students – this assessment led to the submission of a request to ISS for additional software which is of use for those engaged in historical research.

The workshops helped to broaden the awareness of digital humanities amongst other staff and students and provided exposure to the resources and software that is available. Attendees found it very beneficial and I am regularly asked to host additional workshops.

The online webinar established links with other international institutions with world renowned scholars, and has paved the way for future collaboration, with a new partnership with the University of Maine, there is scope for student exchange and placements in the future.

Impact
When attempting to measure impact, there are approximately 15 staff and students that have developed or improved digital humanities research skills. This includes mapping, and quantitative database analysis. More broadly, this project has engaged with an international audience, and Twitter was full of praise for the Digital History webinar as and after it had been hosted. The project has involved working with other organisations, including ISS – which has indicated a willingness and interest within the history department to move forwards in developing closer connections with internal bodies. Members of the English department attended our workshops, and this has led to collaboration between departments in the development of a research grant proposal, which is aiming to utilise the technologies and skills covered in the workshop. The webinar proved to be an important activity that has strengthened and established connections between the history department at Lancaster and those in other international universities. Possibly the most significant impact has been the increased discussions around the topic by departmental staff, these discussions and meetings have so far been highly productive and are proving to be a promising sign for future developments.

Future Directions

At the conclusion of this project, there have been a number of steps taken by the History department to build upon the progress already made by this project. In the first instance, the Head of Department has ordered more computers and is in additional discussions to construct a designated computer lab for digital research, this will serve as an attractive feature for prospective students – both undergraduate and postgraduate.

From discussions with other members of staff, it has been recognised that there is scope for identifying and providing software which facilitates their research. To this end, it was recognised that Optimal Character Recognition (OCR) software would be of immeasurable value for researchers, particularly those who work with printed and typed materials. Working with ISS we have put a proposal to ISS for five concurrent licences for Abbyy Finereader 12 (Windows). The next step is in providing training for staff, and to showcase ways in which this software can augment academic research.

Amongst the new academic appointments, there have been a number of persons appointed who have strong expertise or background in the digital humanities. The next step is to meet with these newly appointed members of staff and to identify how their skills can be shared with other members of the department.

The key next step that the History department is taking is the commencement of the MA History Digital Humanities pathway. This year, there are new modules that have been introduced for new MA students, including textual and spatial analysis. This first step will pave the way for establishing Lancaster History department as a preeminent centre for digital historical research.

Accessing Stored Resources

In order to provide maximum benefit for as many people as possible, the Digital History Webinar was stored online on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRCr1ZLoTBA for anyone from around the world to watch it. Interested persons are able to view it in their own time for free, due to a comments section; discussions can take place between viewers.

The workshops are based around the needs of those who attended, and so were largely dependent upon those who attended. The slides were sent out to all those who attended for their reference, and such sessions could be organised by other members of staff or postgraduate students with digital humanities skills in the future.

The guided study sessions were slightly more problematic, not least because they were a course of study, and required guiding throughout to resolve challenges students may have faced. Whilst those students were provided with the slides, worksheets, and syllabus, they were also provided with a document, *Excel for Historians*, which has also been distributed to other students, including undergraduates. This booklet provides walkthroughs and an introduction to ways in which Excel can be used by historians in their historical research. This booklet will be hosted on the Digital humanities web space when the site has been completed. It was decided that a booklet would be of most value as it enabled any reader to drop in and access the core skills and guidance without having to undertake all of the study sessions.

Personal Development;

For me, the time spent on the project has been beneficial in three particular ways. The first is that the opportunity to teach and share digital humanities with traditionally trained historians has meant that I have had to reflect, consider upon, and digest differing viewpoints and approaches to historical research. The second is that by organising the workshops and study courses, I have developed skills in identifying and constructing courses of study with a skills orientated intended outcome. Finally, the organising and hosting of events has enabled me to develop contacts both within Lancaster and other international institutions.

I have found the project rewarding and fulfilling, and it has contributed significantly to both my personal and professional development. It has been a challenge to focus the workshops and study sessions and to make them practical and relevant for a wide range of individuals who were attending for various reasons. One of the more unexpected issues were the challenges related to organising the webinar, I was anxious about the event and apprehensive about technical difficulties, but through careful planning there were no difficulties and we have had comments expressing how useful and valuable it was.

As a whole, there is far more to be done within the history department to develop a better understanding of how digital approaches and technologies can be incorporated and adopted by staff and students, but this project has set the foundations, and has shown that there is an appetite for it.

James Perry

Professor Ian Gregory