The Importance of Digital Humanities

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Why is Digital Humanities important and relevant?
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• Digital Humanities is important as it is an authentic exemplification of Humanities Scholarship. It is relevant as it symbolically and tangibly connects the past, present and future.

• Digital Humanities provides an excellent opportunity for reflective and reflexive analyses of modern evolving humanities scholarship.

• The future of computing may not be digital, but Digital Humanities provides important opportunities for investigation into humans’ use of instruments within a particular scholastic community to achieve some objective.

• Digital Humanities relevant as it “is trending” and we need to examine the impact of this on Humanities and Computing scholarship.

An activity is undertaken by a human agent (subject) who is motivated toward the solution of a problem or purpose (object), and mediated by tools (artifacts) in collaboration with others (community).
Digital Humanities as theorised by Activity Theory

Activity Theory

- The subject refers to the individual or group whose point of view is taken in the analysis of the activity.

- The object (or objective) is the target of the activity within the system.

- Instruments refer to internal or external mediating artefacts which help to achieve the outcomes of the activity.

- The community is comprised of one or more people who share the objective with the subject.

- Rules regulate actions and interactions within the activity system.

- The unit of analysis is motivated activity directed at an object (Outcome).

We don’t find many unifying theories of Digital Humanities in our literature, which makes whole-perspective analyses difficult to accomplish; In AFF we have been thinking about Digital Humanities from an Activity Theory perspective!
Digital Humanities as theorised by Activity Theory

- “The relationship between human agent and objects of environment is mediated by cultural means, tools and signs.”

- “In human activity theory, the basic unit of analysis is human (work) activity. Human activities are driven by certain needs where people wish to achieve a certain purpose.”

- “Activity theory incorporates strong notions of intentionality, history, mediation, collaboration and development in constructing consciousness.”

- “An activity is undertaken by a human agent (subject) who is motivated toward the solution of a problem or purpose (object), and mediated by tools (artefacts) in collaboration with others (community).”

References from excellent resource on Activity Theory by Martin Ryder, University of Colorado at Denver, School of Education (http://carbon.ucdenver.edu/~mryder/itc/activity.html)

Activity theory is a powerful and clarifying descriptive tool rather than a strongly predictive theory

(Bonnie A. Nardi)
What are the challenges?
Theoretical Challenges in Digital Humanities

- A key challenge for Digital Humanities is understanding the subject itself, i.e. How does your digital humanities research form part of the whole?

- A good reason for theorising about Digital Humanities, for example using Activity Theory, is to provide some context for establishing the challenges and benefits of the activity!

- Theorising allows us to frame, and analyse, what we do in “small scale” projects within a “large scale” context. It is object-orientated, and separates internalisation and externalisation!

- Theorising allows us to understand mediation in the sense that Digital Humanities activities are mediated by tools, their creation, utilisation and transformation. Activity Theorists believe that tool usage embodies the accumulation and transmission of human knowledge.

- Theorising helps us develop general research methodologies and, not least, focus on ethnographic analyses. These may result from complex relationships involving activities mediated by an organisations (funders; standards), communities (of practice) and frameworks (rule sets).
Another Challenge - Sustaining Digital Humanities!

• Funding Digital Humanities is a difficult challenge, and a wonderful opportunity for invigorating humanities scholarship (Object). There is a complex relationship between Funders (Subjects) and Frameworks (Rules, Community), for example.

• The latter provide the former with opportunities to construct metrics - it’s a complicated relationship! Of course, Frameworks tend to be created by the Digital Humanities (or Humanities) community anyway!

• Sustainable funding is a huge issue for digital humanities. As researchers the majority of the effort in securing sustainability funds falls to us. Should funding agencies advocating infrastructure development for digital humanities provide opportunities for competitive securement of sustainability budgets. What role should commercial entities have in the sustainability process?

• All new “digital” things have a shelf life. Perhaps funders could occasionally not base their initial funding allocation on the longevity of a project’s digital deliverables. Perhaps focus on activity (as valuable) rather than things. Perhaps focus on the value of interdisciplinary scholarship. Perhaps focus on Humanities.
What are the benefits being realised?
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• The obvious benefits, of course, include the tools we generate, use and adapt to mediate knowledge within humanities scholarship. Perhaps the not-so-obvious benefits are the generalised activities interrelating these tools, humans, and communities working towards some objective.

• Knowledge generation, together with new kinds of community discourses, arising from multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research relationships. We see new perspectives on old problems, and old perspectives on new problems.

• We see a lot of “solutions” which many humanities scholars find beneficial. We also see “methods”, “policies”, “standards” and “metrics”; all of which many find exceptionally useful (in some way or other). Researchers now find that they have standardised solutions, using appropriate methods, for problems they didn’t know existed AND they can now measure how successful those solutions are!

• We see exciting new problem spaces warranting investigation. We see new opportunities for new kinds of thinkers to shine. We see new kinds of pedagogies and literacies. Lots of opportunities to “Generate STEAM!”
Some Final Thoughts

• On the Relevance of Digital Humanities ... Digital Humanities is mature enough to warrant critical inspection from some (or many) theoretical perspective(s). Patrik Svensson’s series of articles in Digital Humanities Quarterly make excellent reading. In the forthcoming issue of DHQ Paul Rosenbloom in his paper “Towards a Conceptual Framework for the Digital Humanities” considers (Digital) Humanities as Social Science from a relationship perspective.

• On Challenges ... thankfully (from a researcher’s perspective) there are many challenges ranging from the theoretical to the practical. It is important, I feel, that new scholars should have a good sense of where their research and practice “fits”.

• On Benefits ... tools! We live in an era where we have many interoperable tools. I think that need to be careful we do not become tool-focussed, rather than activity focussed - problematic though as people are often more interested in, for example, how many texts you have scanned, rather than why they were scanned, digitised and used, say.