Digital Humanities: An Exploration of New Programs in Higher Education and its Meaning Making by Community Partners

Soniya Billore
Department of Marketing, Linnaeus University
soniya.billore@lnu.se

Koraljka Golub
Department of Cultural Sciences, Linnaeus University,
koraljka.golub@lnu.se

Abstract

As part of the Digital Humanities initiative at Linnaeus University, this exploratory study is aimed at gathering views and opinions from relevant stakeholders in the regional community in order to understand their perspective on Digital Humanities as a subject of study and the potential application of Digital Humanities to address local requirements. The ultimate purpose of the study was to inform the development of Digital Humanities at Linnaeus University in a way that would address genuine needs within society. The principal research question of the study was: "What views and opinions are there about Digital Humanities and how can they be exploited for the optimal benefit of the education and industry sectors of the local region of Småland?" A focus group interview of four stakeholders was conducted, each representing a different cultural institution in the region. The participants largely agreed that Digital Humanities could be used in optimal ways to engage people and end users in their work and social engagement. The Digital Humanities project could contribute and engage with wider society through schools, museums and other public platforms. However, the sustainability of the Digital Humanities project requires further study. Also, as a provider of higher education in Sweden, it was important to bear in mind that the proposed educational programme in the Digital Humanities needs to keep to the three pillars of Education, Research, and Engagement with Society as the primary components of their course development.

Introduction

Today we live in a rapidly evolving environment supported by high-quality technology and instant communication, which has impacted upon professional, commercial and academic aspects of

society, amongst others. In higher education, there is a constant need to keep respective fields up-to-date with the changing needs of the society. A comprehensive approach to addressing this challenge requires the creation of interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary programmes.

The field of Digital Humanities, lying at the intersection of humanities and computing, is an example of this approach, which may be instrumental in bringing about change by serving as a platform for novel interdisciplinary collaborations aimed at addressing societal challenges. Digital Humanities have been identified as a toolkit that assists in furthering research, studies and collaboration between distantly related fields which have not conventionally been connected in the Humanities (e.g., Kirshenbaum, 2010). Svensson (2012) goes further with the discussion of the scope of Digital Humanities and the breadth of its inclusiveness within Humanities by pointing to the opportunities which this approach will target and the resulting responsibilities in higher education. He also argues that traditional humanities and modern Digital Humanities may intersect in interesting new ways leading to 'change not only in terms of size, but also in terms of epistemic texture and institutional focus' (ibid., p. 37).

Harpham (2005) observes that most disciplines in higher education work as independent units with minimal connections to anything outside their realm. This has led to decreased evolution within higher education, a state of stagnation, and an inability to convey the value of the academic disciplines with specific clarity and emphasis. Recent political discussions within the European Union emphasize the need to address societal challenges using new approaches such as Digital Humanities where humanities and social sciences are viewed as 'essential to maximize the returns to society from investment in science and technology' (European Commission, 2016). Davies (2011) considers that contemporary 'knowledge-based' economies must invest in the social, cultural and public resources that support technological innovation and entrepreneurship, thus bringing new ideas and products to market. However, measuring the value of these resources is an unorthodox undertaking in that it defies commonly adopted methods of 'quantitative, economistic and bureaucratic forms of reason' (ibid., p. 401).

Market led higher education

Higher education and the array of subjects that it offers are influenced by market economies. For example, Newman, Couturier and Scurry (2010) study the dynamics of market influences on higher education and point to the inevitable transformations due to the agendas of political parties, public policies, corporate goals and market structures. Marginson (2006) explores the effect of competition among students to attend élite institutions and its impact on higher education courses and their quality. Development of new courses offering unique course content

helps to position higher education institutions differently from each other and helps to counter global competition. Engagement with Digital Humanities in higher education varies from country to country and depends on national policies and priorities. For example, variations may be observed in how more structured and developed economies use digitalization differently compared to the priorities of emerging economies (ibid.).

Higher education is viewed as central to the objectives of public and private institutions and related economic development, employment, and the development of skills and talent. In the process of engaging with Digital Humanities, local community stakeholders can provide assistance in identifying the required set of skills for the job market. They can give guidance on how to build interdisciplinary collaborations in order to expand the potential opportunities. What is more, courses and programmes informed by actual requirements will enable highly skilled professionals, whose education has been markedly enhanced by practice-informed education and joint, cross-sector innovation, to address future societal challenges. All of these factors are pertinent to the Humanities and the rapidly evolving Digital Humanities.

Methodology

As part of the Digital Humanities initiative at Linnaeus University (Linnaeus University, 2015) this exploratory study is aimed at gathering views and opinions from relevant stakeholders in the regional community in order to understand their perspective on Digital Humanities as a subject of study and the potential application of Digital Humanities to address local requirements. The ultimate purpose of the study was to inform the development of Digital Humanities at Linnaeus University in a way that would address genuine needs within society. The principal research question of the study was: What views and opinions are there about Digital Humanities and how can they be exploited for the optimal benefit of the education and industry sectors of the Småland region?

A focus group interview of the stakeholders was conducted. The invitation to participate was sent out to nine representatives from the LNU's Digital Humanities initiative network (available at https://mymoodle.lnu.se/course/view.php?id=19831). Of these, four were able to take part. Three participants were able to attend the focus group, of which two were present on site, one participated online via video conference, and one provided his views via an email questionnaire. The focus group interview was led by two researchers, the authors of this paper. The four participants were representatives of the following institutions and organizations:

1. AV Media Region Kronoberg (publically financed institution for media and IT in schools);
2. Det fria ordets hus (The House of Free Speech) in Växjö;

3. Kalmar Castle in Kalmar; and,
4. Kulturparken Småland (encompassing the biggest group of local cultural venues) in Växjö.

The focus group interview was held on 8 June 2016 and lasted 120 minutes. It was audio recorded with the permission of the participants to allow post-interview analysis. The response to the email questionnaire was received on 15 June.

The interview guide comprised ten questions organized in the following principal areas:
1. Views about Digital Humanities as a subject and project at Linnaeus University;
2. Relevance to the local area, in this case Småland;
3. The state of skills and talent pool in the market and relevance to Digital Humanities;
4. Points for the attention of the Digital Humanities project in order to provide for the needs of society and local industry.

Results

The results were laid out according to the four principal areas under investigation, as outlined above.

Views about Digital Humanities as a subject and project at Linnaeus University
The respondents discussed how Digital Humanities is both a way of thinking and a method. By method they referred to new digital tools such as social media, visualization of data and digital storytelling, all invoking new ways of presenting information. In addition, it provides new modes of interaction and communication with end users, whereby users are also creators of information. For the most part, there is no time to reflect before publishing as the demand for interaction and communication on social media requires a fast response. All these interactions therefore demand new and different ways of thinking.

The Digital Humanities project at Linnaeus University was acknowledged as an outstanding initiative that has a great impact both at an academic and societal level. It was identified as a new way of networking with local and global participants (note that the network is also largely international), which would enable a flow of knowledge and input from various sources. In this way, it would provide a promising platform to discover new ways of communication and expression and adapt age-old techniques such as storytelling into more innovative, creative and engaging for all kinds of users. The respondents showed an interest in the multidisciplinary approach of the project and its potential to bring the Humanities out from its traditional sphere

and make new connections with previously under-researched areas such as business, marketing, economics etc.

Relevance to the local area, in this case Småland

The overall perception was that the region of Småland needs development in many sectors, for example business, culture, education, innovation etc. The project could contribute to this development at the community level and engage with society through schools, museums and other public platforms. While emphasizing that the Småland region needs a lot of support which initiatives like the Digital Humanities project at Linnaeus University could provide, it was also important that such projects continue to survive and engage with society in the long term. Activities should be undertaken democratically and with a sustainable strategy in mind. In order for the project to be relevant and for it to contribute to the development of Småland, it was crucial to communicate the goals of the project to its stakeholders with the utmost clarity so that its mission and vision could be well understood and appreciated by all participants and partners. A further challenge is to build agreements between various sectors, directly or indirectly, and to be able to innovate for the benefit of the region. This is in agreement with Marginson (2006) who has particularly pointed to the importance of aligning Digital Humanities with local needs, regional priorities and related industrial and market growth.

The state of skills and talent pool in the market and its relevance to Digital Humanities

The respondents were in agreement that strategic thinking, while very important, is largely lacking in terms of social development and its strategic planning by local municipal bodies. With this in mind, they recommended that the education modules of the Digital Humanities course at Linnaeus University should include knowledge about strategies and strategic thinking as an integral part of the educational programme in order to change the mindset of students from traditional to innovative patterns of thought. Education in the Digital Humanities should also incorporate general communication skills as well as project management skills in its curriculum. In addition, the students need to be acquainted with and knowledgeable about cultural changes among the stakeholders that could be a hindrance in a professional environment especially when working within multidisciplinary team structures. In particular, an understanding of approaches to research and study in the Humanities by IT professionals and computer scientists is largely lacking. Finally, the needs of society today need to be thoroughly understood in order to inform us which priorities should be the focus of education in the Digital Humanities.

Points for the attention of the Digital Humanities project in order to provide for the needs of society and local industry

The respondents pointed out that, as a higher education provider in Sweden, the project should build an educational programme in the Digital Humanities. This programme should be guided by the three pillars of Education, Research, and Engagement with Society as the primary components of their course development. It was suggested that the project should be able to impart education to both full-time students and working professionals through the same course modules. One option would be to create a Master's program taking a multidisciplinary approach, together with courses tailored to teacher training which could focus on digital tools for teaching.

A remark on the results

While the discussion about educational needs in the Digital Humanities seem to have taken place at the levels of students' generic skills (e.g., digital, social and project skills), it would have been interesting to learn about why specifically *humanities* education would be of relevance to the local community. For example, there certainly is no lack of local sites that would foster some cultural heritage research or activity, such as Kalmar Castle with over 800 years of history, the ruins of Kronoberg Castle from the 15th century, the archeological site of Sandby Borg on the island of Öland, and the House of Emigrants, to name a few.

Conclusion

The participants that Digital Humanities make up a very broad topic which can be considered both as a method and a way of thinking. The discipline could be used in optimal ways to engage people and end users in their work and social engagement. For the latter, it is necessary to devise new modes of participation for end users in order to collate their ideas and interests and to create new content. The Digital Humanities project at Linnaeus University was acknowledged as an outstanding initiative enabling for cross-sector collaboration, and allowing scholars in the Humanities to collaborate with computing and business disciplines more substantially.

The overall perception was that region surrounding Linnaeus University needs further development in many sectors, for example business, culture, education, innovation etc. The Digital Humanities project could contribute and engage with wider society through schools, museums and other public platforms. However, the sustainability of the Digital Humanities project needs to be addressed.

The respondents were in agreement that strategic thinking, while very important, is largely lacking in terms of social development and in its strategic planning by local municipal bodies. With this in mind, they recommended that the education modules of the Digital Humanities project should include components related to strategy and strategic thinking. The course is also expected to include communication skills building and working in multidisciplinary teams. Finally, the respondents pointed out that, as a higher education provider in Sweden, it was important that the Digital Humanities programme should keep to the three pillars of Education, Research and Engagement with Society as the primary components in their course development.

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