New Models for Supporting Digital Scholarship: UNT's DiSCo

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Abstract

This poster examines a new model for supporting digital scholarship across the disciplines, as implemented by the University of North Texas Digital Scholarship Co-Operative (DiSCo). Digital scholarship offers researchers ways to communicate and collaborate across disciplinary boundaries and provide opportunities for training and access to digital tools to support research and teaching. Recognizing this needs, UNT established the DiSCo to serve as a focal point for data management support, and to foster the development and use of digital tools for research, teaching, and learning.

Keywords: digital scholarship, interdisciplinary research, collaboration, community-based

Introduction

This poster presentation examines digital scholarship and its impact on the humanities and interdisciplinary education. It explores new models for scholarship, and touches on the cultural implications for research, communication, and knowledge generation. It describes the implementation of a co-operative model of digital scholarship support implemented at the University of North Texas. This model is research-based, and intended to intervene in a range of disciplines. The Boyer Commission Report (1990) advocated for the scholarship of teaching, learning and service as key components to be valued by educational institutions and government policy. As technology use and the digitization of material continue to increase, universities and research institutions find themselves facing a paradigm shift (Feinberg, 2004). Technology offers new possibilities instigating change, compelling institutions to rethink and adopt new methods of scholarship (Lui & Thomas, 2012). UNT's DiSCo is one model for supporting digital scholarship in a rapidly changing academic environment.

Background

Digital scholarship has the potential to fundamentally transform the way research, teaching, and learning occur in higher education. Traditionally, the function of the university or professoriate has been to generate knowledge. Scholarship is viewed as an individualistic endeavor with scholarly practices varying across disciplines. The natural sciences follow a data-centric approach that consists of asking clearly defined questions, collecting and analyzing data, using standardized methodology and potentially obtaining replicable and generalizable results. Large scale, capital- intensive collaborations support individual scholars in the scholarly process. Distributed groups and teams achieve a greater degree of specialization and division of labor (Galison & Hevly, 1992).

In the humanities, the focus has traditionally been on selecting and synthesizing sources around common themes, to note subtleties that cause one artifact to be different from another. It is about "investigating the meaning and form of a concept" and is dependent on the researcher's interpretation, reflection, and evaluation (Feinberg, 2004 p. 21). Typically funding was limited, and emphasized individual awards to scholars, and projects existed within disciplinary boundaries with teams pursuing their own individual objectives with limited meaningful interaction with one another (Smith, 2003; Nichols, 2009).

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Boyer in his seminal report proposes a more inclusive view of scholarship "a recognition that knowledge is acquired through research, synthesis, practice, and teaching" (Boyer, 1990, p. 24). This includes four dimensions; discovery: original research to advance knowledge in a specific discipline, integration: extending knowledge across disciplines and time, application: engaging a wider audience beyond the field to extend the disciplinary knowledge along with peer feedback, and teaching: the systematic study of teaching and learning with application, reflection and evaluation ingrained (Boyer, 1990; Pierce, Weller, Scanlon & Kinsley, 2010). In keeping with these principles, new technology and digital resources offer possibilities for bringing together the broad range of scholarly practices to support interdisciplinary research and scholarship (Schreibman, Mandell, & Olson; 2011). Both, universities and funding institutions are demonstrating their recognition of the need to provide support for digital scholarship.

Digital Scholarship

The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) defines digital scholarship as "any element of knowledge or art that is created, produced, analyzed, distributed and/or displayed in a digital medium for the purpose of research or teaching" (2007). Other experts see it as a way to support open access to scholarly knowledge and a way to promote the use of innovative research methodologies (Spiro, 2007; Lui & Thomas, 2012). For institutions, digital scholarship helps challenge traditional standards for tenure and promotion (Fitzpatrick, 2011). The past two decades have seen the emergence of numerous centers for Digital Scholarship that support interdisciplinary research in different ways. Some exist within single institutions, supporting diverse projects, programs and activities, while others support multi-tiered projects across institutions. The centers bring together funding sources and a mixture of professional expertise from K-12 educators, higher education, government and industry (Bos et. al., 2007, Nowviskie, 2011). Notable examples of center-based projects are *The Valley of Shadows*, *Rome Reborn* (Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, University of Virginia) and ventures such as *Project Bamboo* (Zorich, 2008, Mellon Foundation, 2010)

Models for Support

There are three principle models for supporting digital scholarship, the enterprise-based model, the innovations model, and the community-based model.

On the enterprise end of the spectrum is the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media (CHNM). CHNM's focus is on tools and projects for digital humanities research. CHNM makes historical collections available online and develops tools for researchers, like Zotero for collecting, managing and citing research sources, and Omeka, a platform for online exhibition. Websites like Teachinghistory.org and History Matters provide secondary educators with teaching and learning resources. CHNM established THatCamps, the unconference model for collaborative discourse on digital humanities topics. Participants propose their own topics and follow workshops to demonstrate particular tools and methods. Attendees include scholars, students, librarians, archivists and museum professionals. CHNM follows the enterprise-based model where funding is fixed, ongoing and regulated and sponsors are government institutions and private foundations such as the Department of Education, the Library of Congress, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Mellon, Sloan, Rockefeller, and Kellogg foundations among others.

An example of the innovations model of scholarship is The Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. The Institute maintains an online presence where materials, intellectual support, and space are offered to young scholars to teach write, research and publish. Social media such as a blogs and Twitter give members a voice, connect them with each other and help them to stay informed. A platform for creative projects allows people to post their project ideas, make bids, pledge support, earn funding, and share rewards, using a crowd-sourced funding model to support individual projects. Examples of successful projects are Diaspora: an open source personal web server, and Explore Newport: a 3D virtual tour of the historic town of Newport. Community building is central, funding a shared responsibility, peer support and reward embedded in the process.

The Digital Scholarship Co-Operative (DiSCo) at the University of North Texas follows a community-based model of scholarship, customizing features based on the needs of its constituents and then aligning institutional goals to reflect these values. DiSCo supports graduate students and faculty in

integrating digital research tools into their teaching and learning by providing resources for student projects, born digital art and collaborative works. It will offer fellowship and employment opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students to develop skills in digital tools, project management, collaboration and research. Evaluation of data management and digital curation practices help develop best-practice recommendations, and are part of the institution-wide infrastructure. The Co-Op seeks to champion Open Access at all levels of scholarship.

DiSCo supports its community by connecting users and their research needs to centers of excellence and expertise within the university without duplicating extant services. The Co-Op views itself as a router, receiving requests from scholars for resources, and forwarding the researcher to extant service centers. Where unmet needs exist, the Co-Op can evolve in response to fill gaps in the research needs of its stakeholders.

Digital resources provide the platform for collaboration, communication and research. With these objectives in mind, the Co-Op sponsors periodic webinars and workshops with national leaders in digital scholarship, hosts the annual Digital Frontiers conference, established an inter-institutional humanities colloquium to facilitate trans-disciplinary conversations between technologists and scholars, and participates in International Open Access week programming. The goal is to foster the creative use of digital resources in research, teaching and learning through an environment of coordination and collaboration across campus with DiSCo as its hub. This has the potential to minimize minimizing the siloing of skills and expertise. These initiatives come together to serve the University's Four Bold Goals (http://www.unt.edu/features/four-bold-goals/), helping fulfill the institution's broader educational mission.
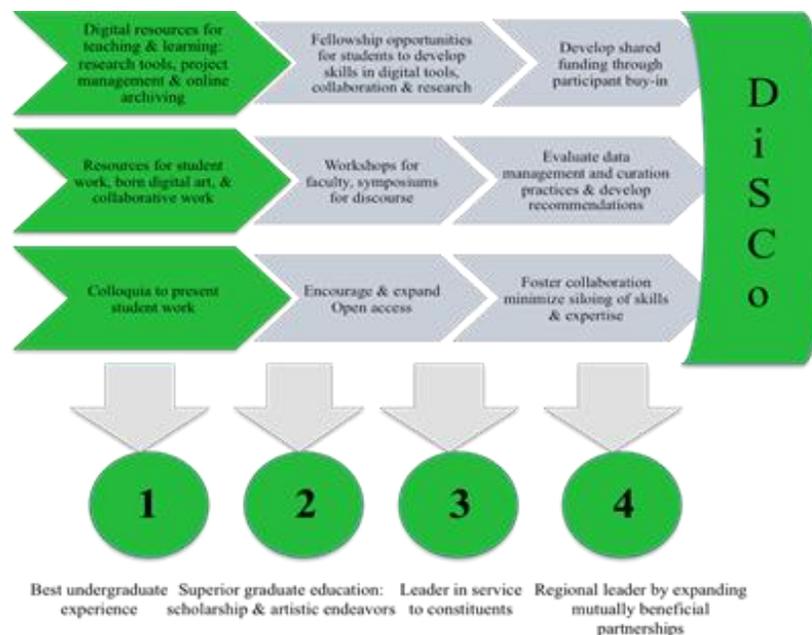

Figure 1 - DiSCo & UNT's Four Bold Goals

Conclusion

Digital scholarship offers researchers new ways to communicate and collaborate across disciplinary boundaries, allowing for more democratic means of knowledge creation. As centers continue to advocate for scholarship the concept does pose certain challenges, with collaborative efforts often translating into the sharing of resources more than the sharing of knowledge, and give rise to redundancies in efforts as centers inadvertently become holders of information instead of disseminators of knowledge (Zorich, 2008). The community-based Co-Operative model advanced by UNT seeks to alleviate these redundancies by facilitating access to existing services in response to the needs of its

stakeholders. Further detail and in depth aspects of digital scholarship will be discussed at the conference poster presentation.

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