

Digital Humanities Among LIS Programs: An Analysis of Courses

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ABSTRACT

The digital humanities (DH) remain a growing area of interest among researchers and locus of new positions within libraries, archives, museums, and cultural heritage organizations. In response to this demand, many library and information science (LIS) programs have developed curricula around DH. While previous studies have surveyed DH programs, courses, and instructors generally, none has systematically examined DH courses within the context of LIS. This paper analyzes courses offered within ALA-accredited programs and iSchools, presenting descriptive findings, exploring unique aspects of DH education within LIS, and contextualizing courses offered in the United States and Canada with other courses worldwide.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

digital humanities; education; curriculum; education programs/schools; pedagogy

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

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BACKGROUND

Training in the digital humanities (DH) takes place in different contexts, from university courses and programs to more informal settings such as workshops, (un)conferences, institutes, and more. Formal educational offerings provide unique opportunities for studying a field, particularly because they carry accreditation standards, organize labor and capital, and present public-facing views of the field to prospective students, employers, funders, and others.

Previous studies have examined DH programs and courses (Terras 2006; Spiro 2011; Sula, Hackney, and Cunningham 2017), as well as their development in different educational settings, often noting the histories and peculiarities of each institution—a “localization” that

Knight (2011) regards as necessary in DH. While other studies have addressed how librarians learn DH (Senchyne 2016) and teach DH (Rasmussen, Croxall, and Otis 2017), none has systematically examined DH courses within library and information science (LIS) programs, which are responsible for training information professionals for work across libraries, archives, museums, and cultural heritage organizations. These institutions, particularly libraries (Rockenbach 2013), have been discussed as key sites of DH work and partners for collaboration.

A study of these DH courses helps to show how LIS has transformed familiar concepts of information creation, collection, organization, management, and dissemination to digital landscapes and adapt them for use among digital humanists as a community. It also addresses the skills and competencies that LIS programs provide students and employers, and the unique capacity of LIS to contribute to DH more generally. Though each local institution may emphasize different aspects of this broad field, an analysis of common elements among existing courses helps provide some guidance to others who wish to add course offerings at their own institutions and affords LIS as a whole the opportunity to assess its current approach to DH and make timely interventions where necessary.

METHODS

The research presented in this paper is part of the ongoing work of the iSchools Digital Humanities Curriculum Committee (iDHCC), convened in 2019 in parallel to a Data Science Curriculum Committee, to report on opportunities and possible models for DH curricula in iSchools. The iDHCC is currently reviewing DH programs, courses, job listings, and other sources—all of which have informed and contextualized the analysis of courses presented here.

This study draws on Spiro's (2011) methodology, which examines course assignments, readings, media types, key concepts, and technologies in an attempt to characterize the “hidden curriculum” found throughout DH courses. Spiro's study analyzed 134 English-language syllabi from DH courses offered between 2006–2011 across a range of departments.

Here, we focus on a smaller set of courses offered recently at American Library Association (ALA)-accredited programs and within iSchools. The ALA currently lists 62 programs in the United States and Canada that have undergone external review and meet the ALA Committee on Accreditation's Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies. The iSchools organization, founded in 2005, includes 109 schools, colleges, and departments worldwide that share a fundamental interest in the relationships between information, people, and technology. Though there are overlaps between these two groups—about 80% of iSchools in the US have ALA-accredited programs (see Figure 1)—there are also important differences, given their histories, conceptual scope, and geographic locations.

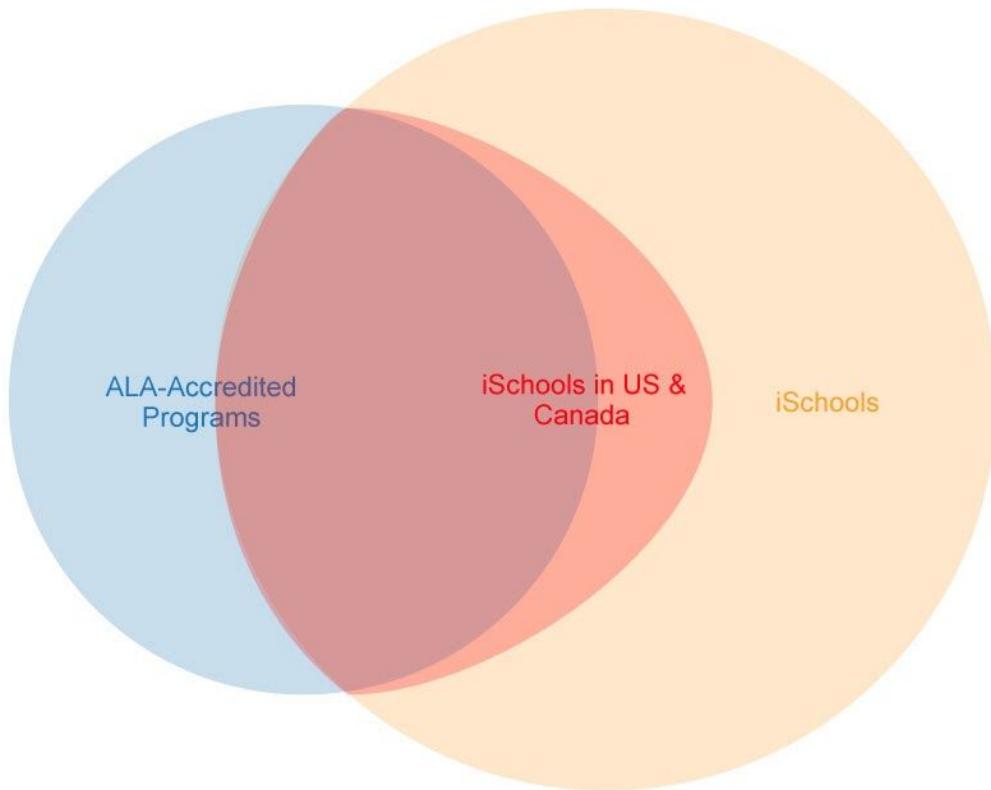


Figure 1. Comparison of programs and schools included in this study.

In addition to analyzing commonalities shared between these two groups, we also examine differences and their implications for practice within various institutions in the field. For example, library-specific programs may focus more heavily on research activities and facilitating work with faculty, while broader, information-based approaches may coincide with efforts around linked open data, publishing platforms, gaming, or maker culture. A thorough examination of courses in these two settings allows us to examine these nuances as part of the overall variety of DH work.

Finally, we situate our findings within broader discussions of DH, with particular reference to global and local constructions of the field. While the data on ALA schools is limited to the United States and Canada, we contextualize our findings within the work of iDHCC, which is international in scope, noting contrasts and continuities between DH courses worldwide.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Data for this paper was collected by consulting the Directory of ALA-Accredited and Candidate Programs in Library and Information Studies (<http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/accreditedprograms/directory>) and iSchool Directory (<https://ischools.org/Directory>) and manually inspecting all programs for DH courses. We only included courses that are explicitly about DH, rather than a broad array of courses which could

be related to the field (e.g., digital libraries, data management, academic librarianship, and scholarly communications). Explicit mention of DH in a course title or description is important in several respects: It signals an intent to link the course directly to the field and to prepare students for work in relevant positions. It also necessarily brings meta-level or reflective considerations about the field, which some have noted as critical in defining DH (Liu 2013). Similarly, we did not include traditional subject librarian courses (e.g., humanities services and sources, art librarianship), which might include mention of DH as an emerging trend of the field. Future work may consider how such courses, though not about DH *per se*, can incorporate aspects of the field to build awareness, interest, and capacity among students.

Where possible, the most recent syllabus for each course was obtained through web search or direct request to the instructor (this effort is ongoing). Following Spiro, these syllabi will be examined for course assignments, readings, media types, key concepts, and technologies, which will be categorized and analyzed for frequency. In addition, we will consider questions of accessibility (as related to the format of the class, media, and assignments) as well as syllabus policies, such as open educational resources and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

To date, we have inspected all ALA-accredited programs and iSchools and identified a total of 60 courses across 35 institutions worldwide. The distribution of these courses among ALA-accredited programs and iSchools is notable. Around one-third of all ALA-accredited programs offer DH courses, while just over one-fifth of iSchools offer them—around one-third if we consider only iSchools in the United States and Canada. These figures rise to just over 40% for ALA-accredited programs located within iSchools (see Table 1 for details). Put differently, all iSchools in the United States and Canada that offer DH courses do so within ALA-accredited programs, and those programs account for more than half of all iSchools with DH courses, despite being only one-third of iSchools by count. For a visual comparison of these distributions, see Figure 2. These findings again point to deep engagements between libraries and DH, which we plan to examine further in analyzing course readings, assignments, and key concepts.

	Total listed N	Offering DH courses N (%)
ALA-accredited programs	62	20 (32.3%)
ALA-accredited programs within iSchools	36	15 (41.7%)
iSchools within the US & Canada	48	15 (31.3%)
All iSchools	109	26 (23.9%)

Table 1. Summary of programs, schools, and courses included in this study.

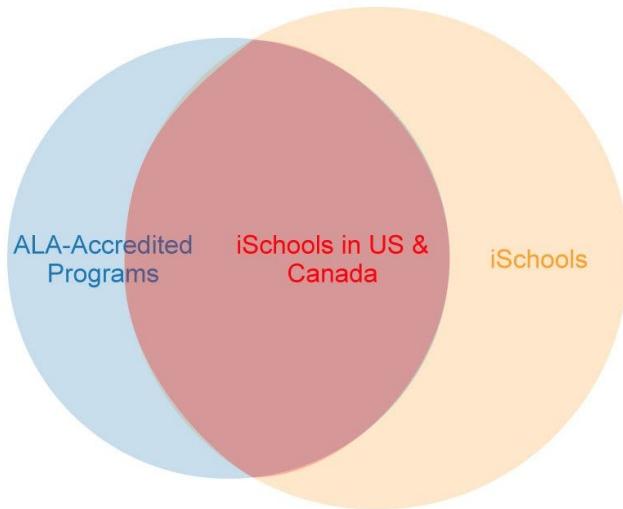


Figure 2. Comparison of programs and schools with digital humanities courses.

At present, we have located just over one-fifth of course syllabi online, either through department/school websites or through faculty websites. This availability seems resonant with the values of “openness” and “collegiality and connectedness” that are said to mark the field (Spiro 2012). We are currently requesting the remainder directly from instructors and/or departments. Once obtained, we will analyze all syllabi as described above in Methods, dividing our interpretations between ALA-accredited programs, iSchools, and iSchools in the United States and Canada, along the lines discussed above. The presence of DH courses in ALA-accredited programs outside of iSchools will further establish the distinctive character of DH within the context of librarianship, while the presence of courses in iSchools outside of North America—currently China, Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, Sweden, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom—will help to situate our findings with a more global context of DH. As Risam (2017) and others have noted, discussions of DH often center on North American or at best Anglo-American approaches, when in fact all DH practices are local and we should embrace “the dialectical relationship between global and local that manifests in our work to understand the hallmarks of the local—our accents—present in DH scholarship.”

We plan to complete this analysis of syllabi in time for the ALISE 2020 Conference—ideally in time for the conference proceedings—and share findings that we hope will raise awareness of unique aspects of DH education within LIS and invite discussions about education and training in the field and pedagogical approaches.

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