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Humanities Collaborations and Research Practices: Investigating New Modes of Collaborative Humanities Scholarship

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Abstract

This paper presents preliminary findings from “Humanities Collaborations and Research Practices: Exploring Scholarship in the Global Midwest,” (HCRP), a collaborative project led by librarians at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Indiana University that examines how collaborative and experimental research practices in the humanities affects scholarly practices, scholarly communication, and research outcomes.

The HCRP study examines a series of multi-institutional humanities research projects funded by the Humanities Without Walls (HWW) Global Midwest initiative, a Mellon Foundation-funded consortium of Midwest university humanities centers. We conducted 27 semi-structured interviews with scholars from diverse humanities disciplines who were HWW Global Midwest awardees. The interviews explore how scholars share data, build self-generated research environment infrastructures for supporting data sharing and communications, and frame their collaborations in the context of broader goals. This short paper will offer new perspectives on scholarly communications and data curation in the humanities, as it will share valuable insights into how information professionals can engage with collaborative, experimental, and multimodal research.

Introduction

With new emergent avenues for research support in digital humanities and collaborative research, and a renewed emphasis on interdisciplinary research approaches, humanities scholars today increasingly engage in rich, innovative collaborations that cross geographic, disciplinary, and methodological borders. This paper presents the preliminary findings of “Humanities Collaboration and Research Practices: Exploring Scholarship in the Global Midwest” (HCRP), a study which explores the Humanities Without Walls initiative as a case study for how collaborative and experimental research practices in the humanities affects scholarly practices, scholarly communication, and research outcomes.

The HCRP study engaged in a series of interviews with humanities and social sciences scholars who led multi-institutional research projects funded by the Humanities Without Walls (HWW) initiative (www.humanitieswithoutwalls.illinois.edu). This short paper will offer new perspectives on scholarly communications and data curation in the humanities, as it will share valuable insights into how information

professionals can engage with collaborative, experimental, and multimodal research.

Background

Humanities Without Walls and the HCRP Project

Humanities Without Walls (HWW) is a consortium that links the humanities centers at 15 research universities throughout the Midwest. The consortium was awarded \$3,000,000 from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to launch a set of innovative and experimental initiatives enabling them to advance education and research in the humanities. One of the first core HWW initiatives was a competitive research challenge focused on the theme of the “Global Midwest,” (<http://www.humanitieswithoutwalls.illinois.edu/initiatives/global-midwest/index.html>), and it aimed to fund multi-institutional collaborative teams to conduct projects that explore grand research challenges related to the global Midwest.

“Humanities Collaboration and Research Practices: Exploring Scholarship in the Global Midwest” (HCRP)

examines the collaborative research practices of HWW Global Midwest awardees to understand how humanities research happens at the level of practice, process, and collaboration. With its emphasis on multi-institutional, interdisciplinary collaboration and its focus on innovative, applied research, the HWW Global Midwest program presented a rich and highly refined set of research cases for the HCRP project to explore the evolving nature of humanities research. The value of such study can be seen in previous social scientific studies of scholarly information use and research practices in the humanities.

Literature on Scholarly Practices in the Humanities

Over the past decade, collaboration has received considerable attention within the digital humanities community (Siemens, 2009; Siemens, 2011; Nowviskie, 2011; Nowviskie, 2012; Deegan & McCarty, 2012; Given & Wilson, 2015). In a 2006 report on cyberinfrastructure, the American Council for Learned Societies highlighted collaborative research within digital scholarship as a motivating requirement for ongoing development of shared infrastructures, opening a path toward interventions that must be planned and executed at the institutional level. With increased attention to scholarly collaboration in the digital humanities, further themes emerged around credit and authorship (Nowviskie, 2011; Nowviskie, 2012), the relationship between collaboration and infrastructure (Edmond, 2015), and the role of project management for alternative academics and other scholars in the humanities (Leon, 2011). While most the social scientific studies above employ qualitative methods, quantitative methods have also been employed to study collaboration networks in terms of project membership (Quan-Haase, Suarez, & Brown, 2015) and co-authorship (Ossenblok, Verleysen, & Engels, 2014).

In the vein of these previous studies, our aim for the HCRP project is to explore the evolving nature of humanities research, and the HWW Global Midwest project awardees comprise a cohort of humanists well situated to reflect upon how collaborative and experimental research initiatives affect their research practices and requirements, scholarly communication throughout the research process, and final research outcomes.

Methods

The project team conducted semistructured interviews with 28 researchers who participated in projects funded by the first round of HWW Global Midwest awards. Participants were asked about the aims of their collaborative projects, the processes for developing their collaborations, the types of resources used to support collaboration and project management, the challenges, data-sharing practices, and how their research approaches and methodologies were influenced by engaging in collaborative research.

We recorded, transcribed, and coded the interviews in ATLAS.ti 7. Preliminary codes were developed inductively based on themes identified in the raw transcripts, and each transcription was coded multiple times to ensure intercoder reliability. This study applies a qualitative analysis method that expands upon prior studies by Brockman et al. (2001), Palmer and Neumann (2002), and Palmer (2005), and also draws upon a theoretical grounding in qualitative content analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Findings

The interviews reveal how build self-generated research environment infrastructures for supporting data sharing and communications and frame their collaborations in the context of broader goals. In our preliminary analysis, the prominent themes emerging are:

- Adaptive research practices: Scholars noted challenges in project management and organizing workflows between researchers with differing methodologies and disciplinary philosophies.
- Diverse modes of scholarly publication: Scholars employed diverse, frequently digital modes of dissemination and publication;
- Networks of scholarship: The scholars frequently cited the networks of scholarship that they built through these collaborative projects, and how the research connected scholars to multiple academic and public communities.

Adaptive Research Practices

Scholars noted challenges in project management and organizing workflows between researchers with differing methodologies and disciplinary philosophies.

Project Workflows and Infrastructure. The interviewed participants identified many project challenges with this new model of activity and funding. These included personnel challenges, the difficulty of identifying collaborators eligible to participate, the challenge of coordinating review by multiple institutional review boards (IRBs), and having to coordinate financial arrangements between three institutions, which are not necessarily used to doing this together. The participants highlighted some positive models of institutional support for effective project planning and organization, specifically the workshops held at Michigan State where you could prototype your proposals, you get feedback on your proposals from peers, where you were given presentations by people from outside the university about collaborating with communities, so it’s in a sense, professional development.

In reflecting on project planning and management, one participant summed up the sentiments of many, saying “that was definitely a learning curve for all of us.” A steep learning curve for many, but one that most deemed worth undertaking. One interviewee shared that “this HWW process, which included certain professional development and information for faculty and then the opportunity to work together in teams to develop the proposal, was just priceless.” Perhaps most positively, another respondent reported among their collaborators that “we all agreed that we’d like to do this again.”

Most interviewed HWW Global Midwest research groups used popular file sharing and communications software and tools (see Table 1). A selection of teams described how they used unique platforms, including one group that made use of the digital humanities software built for the NINES and 18thConnect projects, but whether they used popular or specialized tools, the prevailing ethos in research tool choice and use is captured in one respondent’s declaration that “we’re using an existing infrastructure and we’re applying it in a quite different way.”

Table 1. Tools for research.

File Sharing and Communication	Software
Box	Final Cut 10
Dropbox	YouTube
Google Drive	Omeka
Zotero	Project Websites
Email	Garage Band
Video and cameras	NINES Platform
Telephone/Skype	GIS and mapping software

Diverse Modes of Scholarly Communications and Publication

Scholars employed diverse, frequently digital modes of dissemination and publication. Respondents cited a host of different formats for expressing and sharing their project work. Performances, films, and websites were among the formats they used, as well as traditional written texts and academic presentations, and a number of respondents envisioned using a hybrid of formats to fully express their research products. One respondent described that they intended “to create some kind of interactive map [and] ideally a repository of sounds.” Another discussed their strategies for sharing interview data as a format of dissemination, noting that “we’re still processing the data [and] deciding how to feature it . . . we’re not tweeting the results or something like that.” This response also highlights the complex characteristics of humanities data, and the multiplicity of factors that must be considered as part of the processes of data sharing and archiving.

The variety of data formats utilized by the interviewed researchers suggests that scholars increasingly may break away from traditional journal articles and monographs to explore the multitude of other ways that their scholarship can be shared.

Respondents also saw avenues for making impact via their dissemination through different platforms. As

one respondent explained, "I think what we've contemplated is public dissemination of research using new platforms. I think we've contemplated scholarly output in the traditional platforms . . . journals, whether they're online or in print, but we have contemplated getting research into the hands of stakeholders who are not scholars." This quote also highlights the considerations involved in how scholars could share their research not only with peer academics but other key stakeholders in the public and other sectors of society. This issue was notable across several projects and highlights how the diverse dynamics and stakeholders involved in humanities research collaborations raises new issues for modes and formats for scholarly communications.

Networks of Scholarship

The scholars frequently cited the networks of scholarship that they built through these collaborative projects and how the research connected scholars to multiple academic and public communities.

Credit and Authorship. As respondents discussed collaborative initiatives, many were mindful of the importance of providing appropriate credit and recognition for project partners. One respondent noted that "for us, the notion of collaboration was built around the idea that both parties would be equally acknowledged." Negotiating appropriate credit, however, also can reveal moments of tension within projects. Another respondent observed that "there was a little bit of misunderstanding, and some disagreements [. . .] had to do with who is being acknowledged for what."

Respondents differed on whether they planned for their collaboration to culminate in co-authored publications. One respondent noted, "I didn't expect a lot of co-authoring, more of a co-design of the platform." Another viewed co-authorship as an important "end product collaboration." This issue of co-authorship critically connects to the aforementioned issues surrounding scholarly communications and humanities collaborations, as researchers confront new modes of developing and sharing their research with multiple authors as well as stakeholders.

Networks of Collaborations. The collaborations formed by the Humanities Without Walls research projects created networks between the research institutions and also among various community groups and organizations connected to their research work. Participants often collaborate around shared research interests rather than shared methodologies and built networks around these commonalities.

These new, often fraught research situations brought about various challenges, and researchers searched for the best investigative approaches that incorporated intersecting disciplinary concerns. As one scholar noted, "I want to say this project is peripheral for everyone involved. It's none of their central research. It all, I think, reflects some common questions and even frustrations among the researchers about available spaces for exercise of their disciplinary work, and so it's dealing with things we share in common on the periphery of what we do."

A preliminary visualization (see Figure 1) created of the Humanities Without Walls Global Midwest projects and the partnering institutions highlights the collaborative research networks that have emerged most immediately from the HWW initiative. Unsurprisingly, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Michigan, and Michigan State University are the most central nodes in the HWW network, due to the fact that these institutions had the largest numbers of faculty and researchers who were awarded on HWW Global Midwest grant awards.

Discussion and Conclusion

As a case study, Humanities Without Walls offers key insights into the benefits and challenges of collaborative humanities work.

On one hand, the initiative offered rare and rich support for humanistic inquiry, as it supported the expanded investigations into understudied topics, and researchers could engage in new methodological approaches, as HWW promoted interdisciplinary engagement across institutions, but challenges such as project management and effective communications were encountered by several projects and stand out as key issues to continue to address as these types of collaborations continue to expand.

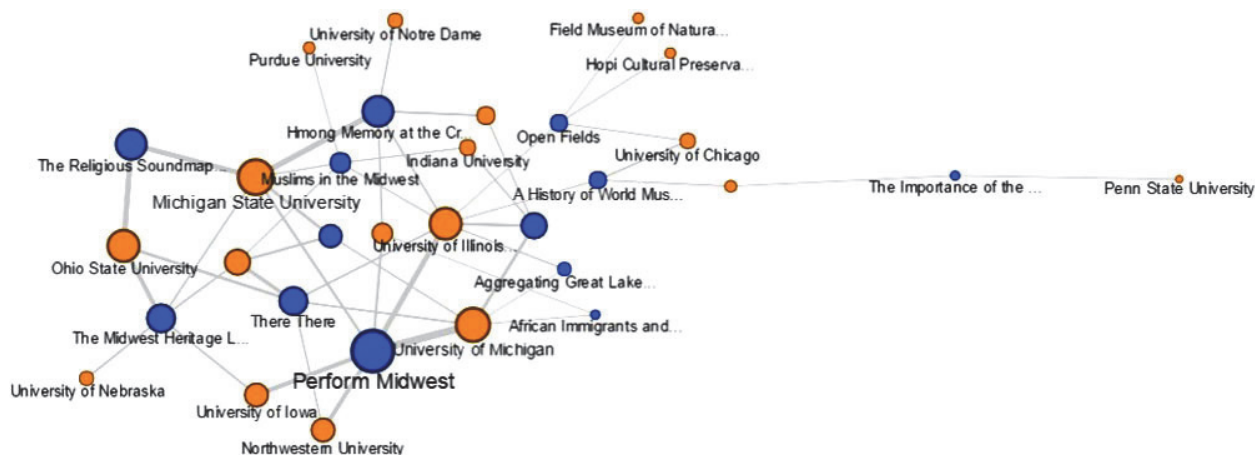


Figure 1. Network of Humanities Without Walls Global Midwest projects and HWW institutions.

As humanities research evolves and expands in new ways, information professionals and publishers must consider:

What are ways that libraries, archives, and publishers can engage with humanities research collaborations?

How could these new modes of humanities research shape the future of library services and initiatives?

We found in our study of HWW Global Midwest recipients that they frequently sought new ways of disseminating their research findings, as the traditional journal article and monograph could not always fully convey the inputs and gathered findings that everyone contributed. As humanities scholars begin to try new formats that are supported by openly available tools, information organizations and publishers can engage in supporting and thinking through these new models for scholarly communication and publishing.

These preliminary results of the Humanities Collaborations and Research Practices project begin to suggest new perspectives for information professionals to consider about scholarly communications in the humanities, and how we can

engage with collaborative, experimental, and multimodal humanities research of the future.

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