

Getting Started With Digital Humanities in Libraries

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In this chapter, Zach Coble details the skills, experiences, and training necessary to get started with digital humanities in libraries. After providing a brief outline of the different types of digital humanities work, we will examine six categories of skills that digital humanities librarians should be competent in. Practical examples of experiences and training are provided, focusing on getting involved in existing projects and connecting with others interested in digital humanities work. An emphasis is placed on the idea that the skills in the digital humanities librarian's toolkit are transferrable and can be acquired through non-digital humanities projects, and that developing these skills will help you become a more well-rounded librarian.

Providing digital humanities services offers several opportunities for libraries seeking to adapt to ever-changing patron needs. The digital shift has significantly changed many core library services, and the digital humanities field represents one area where a basic foundation of digital skills can be applied to support a growing field. Being an effective practitioner of the digital humanities in libraries requires a breadth of basic computational skills. Librarians already have some of these skills, but it is surprisingly uncommon to possess all of them. The best way to acquire these skills is by gaining experiences.

One challenge for getting started in digital humanities (DH) is trying to define the field and identify which tools and methods comprise the core DH toolkit. In general, most people who identify themselves as digital humanists view the field as a “big tent,” meaning DH tends to be more inclusive than exclusive. I take a “big tent” approach and will not bother to put stakes in the ground as to what is and is not DH.¹ It is, however, useful to have some sense of the breadth and depth of activity in the field, so I will briefly sketch out five general areas, borrowed from Brian Croxall,² that give a sense of what we talk about when we talk about DH.

1. Examining digital objects from a humanities perspective

Summary: The fields of media studies and software studies

Examples: *10 Print*, *Software Studies: A Lexicon*³

2. Digital pedagogy

Summary: Using technology in the classroom

Examples: Course blogs, *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*⁴

3. Digital scholarly communication

Summary: Using technology to explore new forms of scholarly interactions

Examples: *dh+lib Review*,⁵ scholarly blogs

4. Digital collections and archives creation

Summary: Digitizing and providing access to physical and born-digital collections

Examples: *Chinese Englishmen*, *Digital Library of the Caribbean*⁶

5. Humanities computing

Summary: Using computers to identify patterns in data (i.e. texts, images) and then interpreting those patterns

Examples: Text analysis, GIS, topic modeling, network analysis

Acquiring Skills

Acquiring a broad set of skills will prepare you to be a more effective digital humanist.

The DH toolkit is comprised of skills that have long existed in libraries but rarely in one person or department. Below I've outlined six areas where I believe digital humanities librarians should be competent. None of them are especially advanced, but taken together they create a foundation that will enable you to effectively contribute to the variety of digital projects come through that the library.

The Research Process

Understanding the research process is important when building relationships with faculty and researchers because it demonstrates that you understand their needs and perspective. It is as important to understand the process at the conceptual level—to be able to articulate how the digital component of a project will strengthen the overall scholarly argument—as it is to

understand it at a practical level, to know why making w adjustment to a tool will produce x data, which means you can't make y argument because of z limitation.

Project Management

Project management is a common role for librarians in DH projects, and involves planning and organizing people, time, and resources in an effort to accomplish pre-defined goals. In larger DH projects that involve librarians, faculty, and IT, it is not uncommon for a librarian to serve as project manager to keep the project moving and to ensure the different groups are working together efficiently.

Computational Thinking

Turning now to more technical skills, I can't overemphasize how important it is to have a solid foundation of basic computer skills. You don't need to learn how to build a computer from parts or become a senior programmer, but you do need to be comfortable with computers, have a curiosity about how technology works, and a willingness to troubleshoot the technical problems that will inevitably arise. Some of these skills are discussed in more depth below, and here are a couple other areas to explore:

- Digitizing material: learn how to turn analog media into digital using programs designed for different types of files (e.g. video, audio, texts, and images)
- Editing files: become familiar with the tools for editing and producing media. For example, learn how to create video or audio clips, combine multiple files into one, and crop an image and do color correction.

Metadata

Another common role for librarians is providing metadata expertise. It is worthwhile to learn how to import, export, and edit large amounts of data (e.g. using Open Refine or Omeka's CSV Import

Plugin) and also to become familiar with the intellectual issues around particular metadata schemas and metadata in general. For instance, when would you recommend using Dublin Core, and when would you recommend using VRA Core?

Online Publishing

Putting content online and sharing it with a larger audience is an integral part of most DH projects. It is useful to learn the basics of HTML and CSS, which are relatively straightforward languages and are essential to understanding web design. Similarly, I would also recommend becoming comfortable with a text editor (e.g. Sublime Text) and using an FTP (File Transfer Protocol) client. If you are responsible for putting content online, these two tools will make your life easier. Also, there are many great content management systems, such as WordPress and Omeka,⁷ that simplify the publishing process. Create free accounts and play with these systems to learn the strengths and weaknesses of each. Also, examine other projects using these platforms to understand how your colleagues are using them to organize and deliver content.

Programming

Computer programming skills are not required to be a digital humanist, but they are very helpful. There is no universal language used by DH scholars; it all depends on the type of work you're doing. With that said, if you would like to learn a language but are unsure where to start, I would recommend R or Python because they are more commonly used than other languages in DH, can be applied to different types of DH work (e.g. text analysis or GIS), and each has a introductory book specifically for humanists.⁸

Experiences and Training

The best way to develop these skills is to get involved in a project. There are many ways to get started, and it's worth remembering that all of the skills outlined above can be picked up from non-DH projects, so keep your options open.

An excellent place to begin is to find a project your library is already working on. Is anyone in your special collections department digitizing collections? Who in technical services is importing, exporting, and editing large batches of metadata? Can you participate in this process or shadow them? Similarly, praxis-based learning has become a popular model for learning DH skills. For example, the Developing Librarian project at Columbia University Libraries features a group of self-organized librarians committed to teaching themselves DH skills and methods by creating a DH project.⁹ Perhaps you could start a Developing Librarian project at your own institution if there are a handful of curious minds and a project idea that interests the group.

Are there faculty or students on campus interested in digital projects? Talk to the humanities subject specialists to learn more about the current landscape and who would be the right faculty to approach.¹⁰ Incorporating a digital project into a course is a great way to get started building partnerships between faculty and the library on digital projects, and can be done in a way that doesn't require especially strong technical knowledge. For example, I once worked with a history professor (who wasn't especially tech savvy but understood the importance of having students develop these skills) to create a project for a course where groups of students used HistoryPin to create "tours" of soldiers' lives after the American Civil War. The project was a success because we used a hosted platform (i.e. no servers or programming required) and the technology was not difficult for the students to learn, yet they gained experience building online exhibits and in the process learned the nuances of telling stories online.

There are several institutes and conferences that provide valuable DH training opportunities. The Humanities Intensive Learning & Teaching (HILT) and Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) are two well-regarded institutes for those in North America.¹¹ Both offer weeklong courses allowing participants to quickly develop a strong working knowledge in a

particular subject area. While not as ubiquitous as they once were, THATCamps are “unconferences” that provide an informal yet productive way to learn new skills, meet people, and explore different ideas.¹² Additionally, the Digital Library Federation Forum and code4lib are more specialized library conferences that are well suited for librarians interested in DH.¹³

Finally, I would recommend reading and keeping up with conversations in DH. There are several quality books on DH that can provide a foundational overview of methods, trends, and issues in the field.¹⁴ A lot of the current conversation takes place over Twitter, and the Humanist and ACRL’s Digital Humanities Interest Group are two listservs where useful information is frequently distributed.¹⁵ The dh+lib website—“where the digital humanities and librarianship meet”—is another resource for keeping up.¹⁶ Additionally, the *dh+lib Review* is a volunteer-driven weekly newsletter that highlights 5-8 timely and relevant jobs, resources, calls for participation, and such. I would recommend volunteering (it’s for one week and requires 1-2 hours of reading) because it provides an easy way to get involved in the community through becoming familiar with the broader conversation.

There is no clearly defined path for getting started doing DH in the library. It is, however, important to be aware of how much time, energy, and resources you and your institution can commit before getting involved in a new project. Similarly, it is critical to remind yourself (and others) that “the digital” is not a panacea for whatever issues your library or institution are facing. With that said, DH projects can and do make meaningful scholarly contributions and they are often a great way to form partnerships across your institution. Equipped with the right skill set and experiences, you can achieve success—even with modest resources—and in the process help your library adapt its services to better support scholars’ needs.

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Biography

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