The *Digital WHOmanities* Project: Best Practices for Digital Pedagogy in the Pandemic Era

[1]Davide Apolloni, [2]Milena Corbellini, [3]Lucia Giagnolini, [4]Anna Sofia Lippolis, [5]Francesca Mangialardo, [6]Carlo Teo Pedretti, [7]Eleonora Peruch, [8]Giulia Renda, [9]Mattia Spadoni

University of Bologna, Italy

[1]davidemaria.apolloni@studio.unibo.it
[2]milena.corbellini@studio.unibo.it
[3]lucia.giagnolini@studio.unibo.it
[4]annasofia.lippolis@studio.unibo.it
[5]francesc.mangialardo@studio.unibo.it
[6]carloteo.pedretti@studio.unibo.it
[7]eleonora.peruch@studio.unibo.it
[8]giulia.renda2@studio.unibo.it
[9]mattia.spadoni@studio.unibo.it

Abstract

This paper aims to enter the ongoing debate about the critical issues of digital pedagogy through the presentation of *Digital WHOmanities*, a series of online conferences and workshops held at the University of Bologna. Distance learning has become one of the most discussed topics in educational institutions during the spread of Covid-19, revealing a discrepancy between the rapid development of technology and the ability of learning environments to adapt to this turn. In view of this ongoing debate, *Digital WHOmanities* tried to define the complex and multifaceted figure of the digital humanist and to provide a methodological framework that could foster further online academic initiatives. Specifically, the accurate organization of timing and contents and the adoption of synchronous and asynchronous approaches have highlighted the effectiveness of flexible digital didactics.

Questo contributo si propone di entrare nel dibattito in corso sulle criticità della pedagogia digitale attraverso la presentazione di *Digital WHOmanities*, una serie di conferenze e workshop online tenuti presso l'Università di Bologna. L'apprendimento a distanza è diventato uno degli argomenti più discussi nelle istituzioni educative durante la diffusione del Covid-19, rivelando una discrepanza tra il rapido sviluppo della tecnologia e la capacità degli ambienti di apprendimento di adattarsi a questa svolta. In vista di questo dibattito in corso, *Digital WHOmanities* ha cercato di definire la figura complessa e sfaccettata dell'umanista digitale e di fornire un quadro metodologico che potesse favorire ulteriori iniziative accademiche online. In

particolare, l'accurata organizzazione dei tempi e dei contenuti e l'adozione di approcci sincroni e asincroni hanno evidenziato l'efficacia di una didattica digitale flessibile.

Introduction

With the sudden eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, the question of education in the "information ontology"([4];[5]), which so far has been tackled too shyly, emerged as a debate of the utmost importance.

The state of exception imposed on teaching has revealed, more than just a technical inadequacy of instructors, a discrepancy between the pace of change and the ability of educational institutions to absorb and re-articulate this turn. A fracture has been exposed, revealing the innate separation between what we *can* do with technology, and *how* technology is understood within the institutional ecosystem. Action is running ahead of thought, in the sense that "we know no longer what we do" ([9]). Thus, avoiding to understand and see the implications of our own actions, "[...] making that blindness a structural feature of inattentive and procedurally focused systems of education, threatens to reinforce and extend that myopia" ([10]: 236). The deeper digital devices get embedded in our life without a pre-emptive recognition and a collective effort from educational institutions to achieve a common ground, the harsher this fracture will grow. Educational systems are doomed to a premature obsolescence, and their own practices and theories will suffer from monadic seclusion.

This cogitation should be all the more compelling if we are talking about the Digital Humanities (hereon DH) domain. A quantitative study over the comparative frequencies of the terms "pedagogy" and "research" conducted by [7] into two volumes recognised as references in the field of DH (Blackwell *Companion to Digital Humanities* and *Companion to Digital Literary Studies*) has revealed an astounding difference in the occurrences of the terms in the academic debate: while "research" occurs 504 times throughout the books, "pedagogy" occurs a mere total of 8 times. In its sparse appearances, the ghost of (digital) pedagogy seems to gain the ancillary status of an afterthought, far behind discussions of theories and research practices in the field of DH. As Hirsch states, "[...] to bracket pedagogy in critical discussions of the digital humanities or to completely exclude it from these discussions reinforces an antagonistic distinction between teaching and research, in which the time, effort, and funding spent on the one cannibalizes the opportunities of the other"([7]: 5).

Moreover, opposing technics to a supposed natural state – that is, claiming that we can freely choose to embrace or avoid technology as an external corpus – underpins a narrative that views technics as a mere and neutral instrument, thus leading to naive ethical (and ontological) assumptions. Digital pedagogy should start to embrace the idea that we co-evolve, both cognitively and ontologically, "with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms (such as language and culture)" ([16]: xv) and technology itself is embedded in our being not just as a cultural practice, but as the foundational element that builds the horizon of existence,

developing our experience of temporality and spatiality[1]. Education is both "the foundational and most significant system of subjectification in society" ([8]: 318) and the place "where calendar and cardinal devices are learned and interiorised" ([14]). That said, learning in a digital environment should not take over traditional education, but has to be seen as a prominent and viable part of its evolution.

Taking this into consideration, we have collected our first-hand experience in developing an ongoing digital experiment of workshops and conferences about the state of DH during the pandemic crisis. This unexpected challenge has quickly led us to rethink our approaches to digital pedagogy, both as students and as curators. Through this logbook we aim to provide not just a chronicle of our failures and achievements, but also a vivid interpretation of our emerging role as digital humanists. Indeed, the starting point of *Digital WHOmanities*, as the wordplay suggests, is the desire of catching a momentary glimpse of the digital humanist's true identity. While this may seem an unattainable hope, we believe that by trying to grasp the fleeting form of the digital humanist, we will obtain – if not answers – a set of operative questions for the times to come. What emerges almost spontaneously from our recognition is that digital humanists could be patient weavers, sewing back this rip between action and thought.

Here we present an attempt to highlight the light and shade of distance learning, and a brief proposal of principles and methodologies that could help to develop a shared view and a common ground beneath digital educational practices.

The project

Digital WHOmanities is a project conceived and developed by a group of students of the International Master Degree in Digital Humanities and Digital Knowledge at the University of Bologna, with the support of programme coordinator Prof. Francesca Tomasi and the sponsorship of FICLIT (Filologia Classica e Italianistica) Department of Excellence MIUR.

The project was born out of a necessity to create a meeting spot between digital humanists and the job market, the latter intended as both public institutions and private companies involved in the lifecycle management of cultural objects. We wanted to build a place for meaningful conversations around the professional identity of the digital humanist, talking with experts and stakeholders about knowledge, competences and know-how required to operate at the intersection between humanities and computer science technologies.

Contents

The project was directed at two different target audiences. The first one was represented by students and people interested in understanding the various fields of application of the DH and

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1   Cf. "tertiary memory" in [15].

the possible paths that a specialist in this field can take in the job market. The second target consisted of public institutions and private companies who wanted to know more about the professional figure of the digital humanist and how it could be integrated in the work process.

The main focus of the project was thus to create a contact point between digital humanists and the stakeholders from the digital culture market sector. Since digital humanists place themselves at the intersection of humanities and computer science, they can take advantage of live interviews and workshops with experts to gain a deeper understanding of problems and opportunities related to digital culture. At the same time, *Digital WHOmanities* intended to dialogue with the stakeholders about which practical and theoretical skills they expect to find in a digital humanist and whether they can be achieved through university studies only. These objectives have been carried out through case study discussions and workshops that will be examined in the following sections.

Fundamental attributes of DH are interdisciplinarity, and the coexistence of various fields of study and related applications of different technologies. In our opinion this aspect, if on the one hand determines the richness of DH, on the other hand it contributes to a vague picture of the digital humanist. Since our aim was to highlight the proficiencies and know-how of digital humanists and make their professional profile clearer, we decided to focus on those domains that were the most structured in our study programme and are generally acknowledged as stand-alone learning areas by experts:

- Galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM);
- Computational linguistics;
- Web technologies;
- Digital publishing.

Our choice criteria for speakers consisted in gaining a representation as balanced as possible of each of the aforementioned areas, resulting in about two or three sessions for each sector. Furthermore, we involved stakeholders from both the public and the private sector so as to compare differences and similarities in the respective approaches to DH.

Specifically, we invited guests from: University of Bologna, University of Venice, Franco Angeli publishing house, CLUEB publishing house, Promemoria group, IBC (Istituto per i beni artistici, culturali e naturali), MiBACT (Italian cultural ministry), Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (national library of Bavaria) and CELI. A full list of our guests is available on our website.

Strategy and methods

The initial project was a one-day event at the University of Bologna. Unfortunately, the spread of Covid-19 confronted us with two possibilities: either cancel the event or adapt it to a digital environment. We opted for the second – more challenging – option with the goal of maximising attention and interaction.

We decided to transform the original time span of the event into a cycle of meetings, one per week, to cover a month in total. Each appointment was further split into two phases: a freely

accessible live interview with the speakers in the early morning, and a restricted workshop led by the same guests later on in the day. We organized the interview in the form of a Q&A to give the speakers the chance to introduce themselves and their career, reflect on their area of competence and allow the audience to ask questions.

The workshop consisted of an introduction to the project by the speaker, the practical work of the group and a final session to share results and impressions. We decided to keep the number of participants low on purpose and, in some cases, we even split them in smaller groups to allow for a better sense of involvement.

In planning the structure of the event, a requisite was to engage the audience in a strongly interactive experience. Aware of the difficulty of participating in digital initiatives that are carried out for long periods of time (e.g., conferences that last entire days with almost no breaks in between presentations), we decided to limit the duration of both the interviews and the workshops to a maximum of one and a half hours.

As a result, we could experience the advantages of alternating a synchronous with an asynchronous modality, combining the live experience of the conferences with the possibility of having access to materials after the events. Indeed, while the videos of the interviews and the materials of the workshop were made available online through our channels after the end of the live event, the workshops were not recorded, thus remaining a unique and very personal experience for the participants.

During the pandemic, the importance of the relation between a synchronous and an asynchronous teaching method became even more evident: for example, as reported by [3], a high number of Italian universities initially opted for a mixed methodology of teaching, and it became clear that an asynchronous approach could be a great supplementary system in traditional teaching, even if not a substitutive one. We believe that different modalities can be diversely effective depending on the aim for which they are employed; therefore, we should think in terms of adaptation, not of replacement. In our case, the coexistence of more than one approach proved to be efficient and productive.

The theoretical discussion over the DH took great advantage from being available to the public also after the end of the events, while the restriction of the workshops to a limited number of registered participants allowed us to offer them some preparatory material, to reveal in advance the tools for the laboratory and to be supported by our speakers during the workshop. In doing so, the acquisition of practical competences proved more effective, as we could verify through the participants' feedback.

We used Streamyard for the simultaneous broadcast of the live interviews on our YouTube channel and Facebook page, both specifically created for the event. In addition, Streamyard allowed us to go live together with the speakers to moderate the speech. For the workshops we chose to use Microsoft Teams for its functionalities and the possibility to split the group into smaller rooms. Our speakers used GitHub and Google Colab to share materials and work collaboratively. GitHub was also used to create the website of the project.

Since communication with the public was a key aspect for the success of our event, we used the Facebook page and a Twitter account in order to promote our initiative and reach the broadest audience possible. We published posts and tweets once a week, and we provided the possibility to register to a newsletter to update the participants and whoever was interested.

Realization of the event

In order to adapt to the dynamism of the digital environment and to the way content is accessed on platforms like Facebook and YouTube, we decided to set up the speakers' presentations in a 20-minute interview format, where the guests discussed both with the interviewers and the public their role in the DH with respect to their working environments.

The theoretical claims that were made during the interviews were then put into practice by the guests and/or their colleagues in the interactive sessions of the workshops. Basing these laboratory sessions on the concepts of "project-based learning" and "learning by doing" [11] and on the subsequent need for communication and interaction, booking in advance was required in order to contain the number of participants. Attendants were provided beforehand via email with the link to the Microsoft Teams room dedicated to the activity and, if available, with preparatory materials for the workshop. Depending on the type of workshop proposed by stakeholders, individual subgroups were sometimes created to carry out specific tasks.

As organizers, we participated actively not only to coordinate the tasks and to monitor the situation, providing help to the participants when needed, but also to receive immediate and reliable feedback. As a consequence, we were able to understand and to experience the event from the point of view of the participants, and thanks to a dynamic approach, we were able to adjust and refine several unsatisfactory aspects.

Evaluation and discussion

One of the most important aspects in creating a service aimed at making any educational impact on a target is assessing in an iterative way people's personal experience. After each session, we took into consideration the most critical and positive aspects and evaluated them in a quantitative and qualitative manner. A more general assessment was then carried out at the very end of the conference series, to understand if the idea and its realization format could be proposed again and be fruitful in the future.

As previously mentioned, we were mainly concerned with participants' interest and interaction. In terms of quantitative evaluation, we relied on YouTube and Facebook analytics to get evidence-based feedback concerning the live event. Mailchimp analytics helped us assess the general engagement with current and future project activities.

The number of views for each interview, both during the live streaming and after its completion, exceeded our expectations. Considering the fact that Italian was the only official language of the event, it was impressive to get over 160 participants following all the live sessions. Moreover, the

number of views increased over the weeks and months after the live streaming, meaning that the interest remained constant through time.

As already reported, live sessions were also broadcast on Facebook, even though a lower number of participants was involved. This is probably due to the fact that Facebook is not recognised nor appreciated as a streaming platform: people would rather follow live streams on YouTube, which remains therefore the most effective real time video sharing website.

Another quantitative sign of engagement concerns users' interaction during live interviews: participants questioned our speakers at least once in each conference, showing an active involvement even when the time constraints could have appeared discouraging.

At the very end of the conference series, in order to collect additional qualitative data, we submitted a questionnaire created with Google Forms to the general public to collect feedback about both interviews and workshops and the overall event. Specifically, we wanted to assess:

- effectiveness of the communication strategy;
- format approval;
- contents satisfaction;
- knowledge and skills achievements;
- willingness to be involved in related events sponsored by the group.

The answers (*id.*) were few (20 out of 86 workshop participants) but extremely positive, and gave us a clear idea of the interest shown for future events[2].

Final feedback, coming from the speakers, highlighted the appreciation and originality of our method, showing participants' willingness to be involved again in future initiatives.

This experience gave us the opportunity to tackle the advantages and disadvantages of online learning from an organizational standpoint. When people's attention is difficult to catch, technology undoubtedly offers opportunities and channels for dialogue, but physical interaction remains an essential component to good communication and understanding. These considerations are true both from the point of view of the speaker and of the public: talking and listening in front of a screen will always lack that level of interconnection that only attendance in person can create. We strongly believe in the importance of physical interaction in teaching, so the event was initially conceived as a face-to-face meeting. However, the circumstances forced us to remodel our program, giving us the possibility to create a model for digital didactics.

The experience of *Digital WHOmanities* allowed us to establish which factors should be prioritised in the organization of an event of this kind, and which are the benefits and drawbacks of using digital tools. Given these considerations, we suggest a model that can be adapted to specific needs for planning ahead a digital event:

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2   For some of them the impact was so positive that they cited us during their university application for the DHDK Master Degree at the University of Bologna.

1. *Analysis of the goals of the event: clearly identify the goals to achieve with the event.* We aimed at creating an interaction-oriented environment to share knowledge and raise awareness between DH professionals and newcomers, geared towards a dialogue between the job market and the University.

2. *Analysis of the audience: identify the audience, understand their needs and provide solutions.* Firstly, we wanted to help new DH professionals and enthusiasts understand which are the opportunities within the job market. To do so, we provided real-life examples of DH careers through the interviews and invited professionals to carry out hands-on activities during the workshop. Secondly, we wanted to raise awareness among employers of the public and private sectors about the role and competences of the digital humanist. The workshops represented an opportunity for the latter to show some DH competences in action.

3. *Analysis of the competitors: learn from others that operate in the same field and build a common ground or differentiate from them.* An analysis of existing e-learning proposals was necessary before we could create ours. From this analysis, we gained insight into the difficulty to reconcile daily commitments with a whole day of full-immersion activities, besides their unsuitability to the digital environment. For this reason, we opted for small and concentrated time intervals.

4. *Modular organization according to competency: in a multidisciplinary team, it is necessary to assign different roles according to different competencies.* DH are multidisciplinary by nature, and so was our team. As a result, each event day was organized in a multi-thematic way, allowing each member of the team to act as a mediator and integrate the speakers' competencies.

5. *Planning of the speakers' presentation: provide a standard framework for the organization of the speech and workshop; maintain a continuous dialogue to model the contents of the intervention.* We provided speakers with guidelines for planning the interview and the workshop, both to organize a structured intervention and to help participants prepare in advance for the practical activity. Despite the standard framework of operation, we left enough freedom to the speakers, while continuing to act as mediators.

6. *Analysis of the tools: analysis of existing solutions for e-learning and online streaming*[3].

7. *Communication: define how to address the audience in order to raise attention and develop interaction.* Nowadays, business happens in social networks, especially for what concerns those fields operating in digital environments. For this reason, we have decided to exploit social media as our main mean of communication. To keep viewer attention, we introduced fixed time constraints that allowed for breaks between activities.

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3   See §2.3 for a list of tools that we employed and the reasons why we chose them.

Conclusions

Digital WHOmanities was born to encourage a theoretical reflection on the role of the digital humanist in the job market. Starting from the interaction with those professionals who witnessed the birth and still happen to be involved in the ongoing affirmation of DH as an independent field of research, we were able to harvest the outcomes of a fruitful conversation and make them available to a curious and engaged public. For what concerns the overall digital learning experience, the development of the key points described in §3, together with the combination of synchronous and asynchronous approaches, proved to be not just a viable but also an efficient teaching choice when flexibility is required. On the other hand, we also acknowledged some of the limits and caveats of online learning. The difficulty in building and maintaining the conditions for inclusion in terms of teacher-student interaction as well as peer interaction affirms the importance of their physical actualization.

The success of the initiative during a time of social and technical acceleration due to the Covid-19 crisis proved the urge to further develop these considerations in the future, with the hope to spread awareness on the priority of a continuous dialogue between disciplines and pedagogy as the first step towards a new sense of community.

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