Chapter 109

Beyond the Back Room:
The Role of Metadata and Catalog Librarians in Digital Humanities

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ABSTRACT

Many professors and students are surprised to learn about the variety of skills metadata and catalog librarians possess that can benefit their digital humanities projects. Metadata and catalog librarians already have experience in areas such as developing project metadata schemas and controlled vocabularies, as well as providing suggestions for project organization, and have the basic abilities needed to support learning new skills such as XML and TEI. This chapter will offer perspectives on how a metadata and catalog librarian can contribute to digital humanities projects. A case study focusing on the involvement of the Metadata and Catalog Librarian with the Digital Humanities Initiative (DHi) at Hamilton College will be used to illustrate one example of how to become successfully involved in digital humanities research on campus.

INTRODUCTION

Public services librarians have been considered the face of the library for decades (Rothstein, 1953), and the interaction of faculty members and these librarians has been the topic of many books and articles (Dilmore, 1996; Raspa & Ward, 2000; Kraat, 2005). Faculty members frequently interact with public services librarians, whether it is for assistance in locating items for their own research, arranging a course lecture on subject-specific resources, or pointing students towards the services of reference librarians when beginning

a research paper. Ducas and Michaud-Oystryk (2003) divided the interactions of faculty members and primarily public services librarians into the categories of teaching/instruction, information services, information technology, research, and collections. Through these communications, faculty members become accustomed to the services that reference and research librarians offer, but many are surprised to learn about the skill sets that technical services librarians possess that can assist them in their work. While reference, instruction, and research librarians are very necessary partners in digital humanities projects,

it is becoming apparent that the unique expertise of metadata and catalog librarians has a new and prominent place in supporting digital humanities projects on campus.

Much has been written on the topic of digital humanities, with articles appearing in discipline-specific journals, as well as in journals exclusively dedicated to digital humanities research. *Digital Humanities Quarterly* (2007-present) and the *Journal of Digital Humanities* (2011-present) offer an outlet for articles and reviews on a variety of aspects of digital humanities projects. Publications such as Gibb's 2011 article about critical discourse in digital humanities provide an entry point for those who are new to this field.

The roles that librarians can (and do) play in digital humanities is a recent field of interest, as exemplified through an informal survey conducted by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Digital Humanities Discussion Group, and as addressed in an article by Coble (2012) that offers suggestions on how to evaluate the contributions of librarians who work in digital humanities. A few short publications exist that focus on how to get involved in and learn about digital humanities, notably Spiro's 2011 article intended for a general audience and Adams and Gunn's 2012 article geared towards librarians; however, a practical guide for metadata and catalog librarians who are "doing" digital humanities is notably absent from the literature.

Metadata and catalog librarians can be involved in digital humanities projects in a variety of ways. Their experience in evaluating, implementing and customizing metadata schemas for library collections can be reapplied to working one-on-one with faculty members on this aspect of building their digital humanities project. Additionally, metadata and catalog librarians can work directly with faculty and students to help them learn and develop a variety of technical skills needed to work in the digital humanities. To accomplish this, a deeper understanding of the various parts of digital humanities research and new technical abilities, such as in working with XML and TEI, may need to be developed.

The purpose of this chapter is to offer perspectives on how a metadata and catalog librarian can contribute to digital humanities projects, particularly on campuses that do not have the means to have a metadata position dedicated exclusively to supporting digital humanities. Topics addressed will include the importance of collaboration on digital humanities projects, useful skills that transfer from traditional metadata and catalog librarian positions to the work that is done in supporting digital humanities, recommendations for additional skill areas to investigate and where to acquire these skills, and suggestions for how best to work with faculty and students on digital humanities projects. A case study found in this chapter focuses on how the Metadata and Catalog Librarian at Hamilton College developed the additional role as the metadata consultant for the Digital Humanities Initiative and will provide one example of how "traditional" metadata and catalog librarians can successfully expand their role into supporting digital humanities projects, while also demonstrating to collaborators the important skills that technical services librarians can bring to supporting this relatively young field.

COLLABORATION IS KEY: DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS ON CAMPUS

Digital humanities projects truly encompass a team effort and rely on the involvement of many people with a wide variety of skills. Faculty members are often the generator of the initial project idea and data, but to build their project in the digital realm, they require support from various partners. The information technology department frequently helps to support these projects in the form of server support, database management, and website

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