Reinventing Approaches to Learning and Accessibility in Digital Humanities: Teaching the Winter School 'Skills in Digital methods' before, during, and after the 2020 health crisis

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Introduction

The digital humanities landscape has undergone a profound transformation in recent years, catalysed by the global pandemic and propelled by the ever-evolving technological landscape. This presentation explores the dynamic journey of teaching digital humanities for history graduate students at the University of Luxembourg before, during, and after the COVID-19 health crisis. Unravelling the shifts in approaches to learning and accessibility, the presentation delves into the pre-pandemic foundations, the challenges faced during the crisis, and the transformative lessons learned that continue to shape the pedagogical landscape of teaching this course today.

The Winter School 'Skills in Digital Methods' at the University of Luxembourg

The 'Skills in Digital Methods' Winter School is an intensive, hands-on, and experimental research bootcamp that teaches graduate students how to design and launch a digital history project. Students arrive having just completed (in the previous semester) the course 'Introduction to Digital History' that also explores computer science and technology topics through the lens of cultural heritage: data visualisation, search & discovery, crowdsourcing, web archiving, and design & UX. Having attended this prerequisite course, students have already traced the rapid rise of digital history as an important means of teaching, presenting, and researching the past. They have gained fluency not only in the theoretical debates surrounding digital history but also in the usage of current methods designed to transform historical scholarship. Coursework there includes regular weekly reflective pieces, student-led discussions, and hands-on practical work. As an introduction to digital history, this course does not demand a high level of technical proficiency at the outset; by the end of the semester, however, students become comfortable with a range of technologies and develop a good understanding of digital history's potential and limits for addressing a variety of historical questions.

By the second semester, students are now ready to tackle the Winter School, where they will seek to build on their new training in digital history to conceptualize and produce an independent research project. Over the past three years we have continually and radically redesigned this Winter School to respond to external conditions and to improve learning outcomes for students.

Teaching the Winter School before the pandemic

Before the pandemic, the Winter School met in a traditional classroom environment, albeit for far longer hours than a typical course. During the week, students were

introduced to one advanced digital method of analysis (e.g., topic modelling) which they then applied to cultural heritage sources, for example historical newspapers, to answer a research question of their choice. The final assignment consisted in an individual, written essay in which they presented their findings.

Teaching the course during the pandemic

The onset of the pandemic necessitated an abrupt shift to online learning, presenting both challenges and opportunities for us as digital humanities educators. The sudden transition exposed disparities in technological access and highlighted the need for a more inclusive approach to learning. In response, we had to embrace digital platforms, fostering creativity in adapting existing curricula to virtual environments. The crisis served as a catalyst for reimagining our pedagogical approaches within the digital humanities. As educators we were compelled to rethink the traditional model, emphasising flexibility, collaboration and inclusivity.

One crucial factor we immediately had to think about was how to limit online fatigue. This course is set up as an intense digital humanities immersion (from 9am to 5pm for one week). As this format could not be changed, we needed to think of ways to avoid students' exhaustion. Virtual collaboration tools and virtual collaborative experiences emerged as crucial components, enhancing engagement and accessibility for diverse learners. In the past, students worked individually on their projects; now, we decided to divide the students into 'teams'. Through a series of group tasks and teamwork assignments, the adjustment introduced an element of dynamicity which limited a potential sense of isolation and passive engagement. Examples of such tasks included hands-on activities using digital humanities tools and critical assessment of real digital humanities research projects from diverse contexts (e.g., the digital heritage sector, the industry) as well as across disciplines (e.g., history, linguistics). We designed such activities to promote peer-learning through collaboration and encouraged students to contribute to the group's assignment through drawing on their personal experiences. Thanks to this combination, students showed to develop greater self-awareness, including awareness of their own function in their social groupings, their own cultural values and the influence of those values upon their attitudes towards "difference". Embedding such practical and critical exercises into the curriculum greatly favoured classroom dynamics that permitted dialogue, and by encouraging learners to think about the class as a community, it mitigated the feeling of loneliness that students were experiencing in those days while also helping them to link the theory to their personal lives' experiences.

One of the most significant outcomes of the crisis was our heightened awareness of accessibility in digital humanities education. The digital pivot prompted us to reconsider traditional assessment methods, opting for more inclusive approaches that accommodated diverse learning styles. To promptly identify appropriate teaching methods and learning support, we asked students to write short (approximately 500-word) daily reflections and upload them to Moodle (the online teaching platform used at the University of Luxembourg). In these reflections,

students briefly summarised their teamwork day and analysed their peers' key contributions but also their team struggles. These reflections were intended to develop students' critical, organisational and collaborative skills; we therefore encouraged them to show engagement by bringing their own voice, for example by reflecting on their own practice as history students. Following each reflection, we gave students our prompt feedback.

In addition to giving clear and detailed written feedback on each reflection, at the beginning of each day, we encouraged group discussions in which each team provided constructive comments to the other teams. This helped students to reflect critically on their own learning, and to realise that their struggles were also shared by the other teams; it also built confidence in the less outspoken students. Moreover, as the University of Luxembourg is a highly multicultural institution, students' diversity is a resource that gives them a chance to learn from and with each other. Using the virtual break-out rooms, teams could develop understanding of the value of collaboration and diversity in a research setting whilst becoming acquainted with digital humanities professional practices where collaboration is the norm.

These adjustments paved the way for a more accessible and equitable learning environment and overall, to a more pleasant virtual learning experience.

Teaching the course after the pandemic

When we came back to the classroom, we decided to retain the changes that we had introduced the previous year as they had proven to considerably improve students' learning experience. We also re-designed the curriculum to include real-life contexts such as language injustice in digital humanities and the digitalisation of education. We believe that this approach enhances students' critical understanding of the wider ramifications of the main social inequality challenges in digital humanities which have become ever more apparent after the pandemic. Through the analysis of specific case studies such as the Library of Congress online database Chronicling America[1] and real projects such as the Republic of Letters[2] and eva.stories,[3] learners formulate solutions to real digital humanities challenges such as minority representations, digital storytelling, and Anglocentrism and convincingly argue them, including critically analyse topics and assessment work using theory to good effect.

Discussion

As we reflect on the transformative journey of teaching the Winter School 'Skills in Digital Methods', it is essential to envision the future trajectories of the dynamic field of digital humanities. The lessons learned during the pandemic underscore the importance of continued innovation, adaptability, collaboration, and a

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1 https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/
2 http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/
3 https://www.instagram.com/eva.stories/?hl=en

commitment to inclusivity. As educators that lived through the pandemic, we need to explore strategies for sustaining the momentum of change, to emphasise the role of ongoing professional development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the cultivation of critical digital literacy skills.

The pandemic accelerated the integration of several technologies into the digital humanities curriculum. This shift not only broadened the scope of digital history but also prompted a reevaluation of collaborative learning strategies within the digital humanities. Online platforms facilitated collaboration, enabling students to engage with diverse perspectives. This shift towards virtual collaboration democratised access to knowledge whilst at the same time fostering a sense of community among the students.

Conclusions

In this presentation, we traced the evolution of teaching digital humanities within the Winter School 'Skills in Digital Methods' at the University of Luxembourg. We shed light on the pre-pandemic paradigms and the seismic changes brought about by the global health crisis. We investigated the challenges faced, innovations introduced, and the lasting impact on learning and accessibility within the digital humanities domain. The reinvention of approaches to learning and accessibility in digital humanities reflects a journey marked by resilience, innovation, and adaptability. The pandemic served as a crucible, forging a new pedagogical landscape that is more responsive to the evolving needs of students and the broader academic community. With this presentation,we would like to encourage further exploration and discussion within the digital humanities community, inviting participants to reflect on their own experiences, share insights, and collectively shape the future of digital humanities education.

References

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