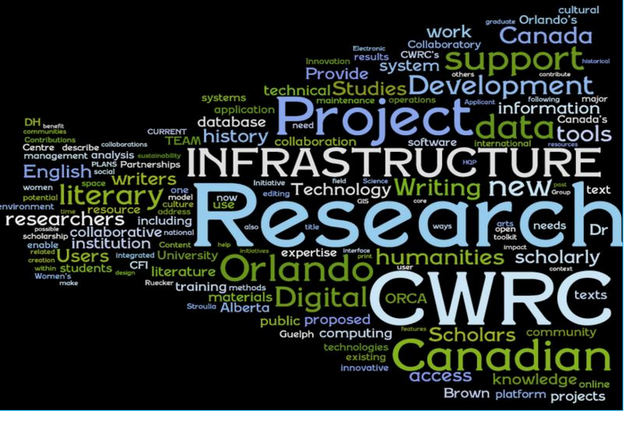

Learning Together While Building: Doing Digital Humanities in a Dynamic World

Dr. Susan Brown, the Orlando Project Team, and the CWRC Team

The **digital humanities** is a field of study, research, teaching, and invention concerned with the **intersection** of computing and the disciplines of the humanities (Wikipedia). This form of research can blur traditional knowledge production processes & change traditional relationships: publishing a complete book is replaced with partial releases of material; manuscript editing is joined to usability testing; printing platforms become changing software languages; using paper & ink or 'off-the-shelf' word processors are replaced by custom software solutions, using evolving technologies. This causes researchers to partner with experts outside of their fields and advances learning, while building these projects together in an iterative process:

Working Across Domains and Disciplines

Disseminating research via the World Wide Web creates stronger, tighter connections between researchers and users. The feedback loop between researchers and users gets smaller and partnerships develop as researchers are also users of a particular text analysis system, colleagues become beta testers of new software, or scholar-users become contributors to an online resource. The general public engages to enrich research: they can lead to new discoveries or help to enhance digital research materials.

Working in digital tool development leads to partnerships with researchers in other fields such as computing science, business, or earth sciences, and from other institutions, with other infrastructure projects nationally and internationally, and with IT industry partners.

Some lessons that this project has about such partnerships:

- Feedback and communication between all partners in the research system is essential
- Respect for different disciplinary languages and cultures is paramount
- Every partner needs to have a real stake in the venture: "service" relationships aren't real partnerships, and aren't likely to lead to real exchange and innovation
- Partnerships take time, patience, creativity, and goodwill to evolve, but they lead to far better results

Matching Funding to Research Needs

In traditional research, the separation between infrastructure and research is very delineated, both in terms of activities and funding sources. i.e. Infrastructure is a building or a machine and research is an activity that takes place within that building or using that machine. This presents a challenge when the infrastructure required to do the research involves developing new kinds of infrastructure. That development requires detailed conversations with researchers to ensure that the infrastructure suits their needs.

There is a growing awareness, by agencies (including CFI and SSHRC), that there needs to be coordination between agencies that fund these types of "blurred" projects, so that funding, reporting, outcomes and dissemination strategies can be harmonized.

Some lessons that this project has learned in coordinating this infrastructure/research loop:

- Be clear on what expenses are allowable by each funder
- Separating infrastructure and research in the project planning and organizational structure to support reporting requirements and help the funder understand the impact of their funding.
- Create open communication with your funders so that they can learn more about why a project may have special needs
- Apply to different funding sources to meet diverse project needs; this requires knowledge and coordination of a range of funding sources and their criteria.

THE ORLANDO PROJECT

The Orlando Project is an ongoing collaborative experiment in the use of computers to engage in women's literary history. Susan Brown (current Director), Patricia Clements (Founding Director) and Isobel Grundy are the lead literary researchers in this textbase project that has produced the equivalent of about 80 print volumes.

It has involved Post-Doctoral Fellows, Research Associates, Graduate and Undergraduate Research Assistants, Systems Analysts and Programmers, Librarians, Computer Scientists, Historians, and administrative personnel.

Susan Brown has applied the lessons learned from this 16-year project to the Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory (CWRC, pronounced "quirk") / Le Collaboratoire scientifique des écrits du Canada (CSÉC). These lessons include:

- Projects with many partners are time-consuming and will take longer than you think
- Build in constant dialogue with your core community
- You can't anticipate your user community fully, e.g. genealogists, the public & literary scholars all interact
- Release a project in stages, you don't need to release a fully complete work: scholarship evolves
- Needs analysis and usability testing are crucial because scholars may not use systems as anticipated
- New relationships can be forged as the project moves forward: the original group of collaborators and partners expands as different expertise is needed or new synergies present themselves
- It can be alienating to scholars to work with technical and/or computing concepts: allow time and space for literary and computing experts to workshop their ideas and learn from each other.
- Work through the "moment when everyone gasps" to create understanding.

The Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory
Le Collaboratoire scientifique des écrits du Canada

Experimenting with Dissemination Models & Partners

Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present is a rare example of the **commercialization of a humanities project**. This entailed working with Cambridge University Press to have the database undergo the same 'peer-review' evaluation process applied to traditional scholarly publications such as journals, and means that Orlando is available to libraries as a **subscription-based service**. This partnership has evolved over time. Recently the Orlando Project partnered with Cambridge University Press to advise on a reprint series of rare books by women writers, based on information in *Orlando*.

The CWRC system is being developed on an open-access model. Studies have show that providing **open access** improves the citation rate and usage of online scholarship (Norris et al, *JASIST* 59.12 [2008]; Wagner, *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship* 2010). However open-access systems face a challenge with respect to long-term sustainability. CWRC is building a closer partnership with libraries dedicated to long-term access and preservation. This includes **growing relationships** with Archival and Special Collections at the University of Guelph Library and with the University of Alberta Libraries.

University of Guelph — Changing Lives Improving Life
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
SFU Simon Fraser University — Thinking of the World
Alberta — Freedom To Create. Spirit To Achieve.
Canada Foundation for Innovation — Fondation canadienne pour l'innovation
University of Alberta
Ontario
Agri-Food and Rural Link — A program of the OMAFRA – U of G Partnership — Mobilizing Agri-Food and Rural Research Knowledge
Supported by the Agri-Food and Rural Link KTT program, funded under the OMAFRA-University of Guelph Partnership.

www.cwrc.ca orlando.cambridge.org www.ualberta.ca/orlando