

Investigating Digital Humanities Pedagogy: Summary of Survey Findings

Study Rationale:

Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of the Digital Humanities (DH) in higher education, and the field is now a growing area of study and practice. However, much of the existing scholarship on the Digital Humanities has focused on DH research, with questions pertaining to DH pedagogy receiving less attention (Brier, 2012; Hirsch, 2012). Given this discrepancy within the published literature, this project seeks to examine and to understand the current perceptions of the roles of the Digital Humanities within teaching and learning at McMaster University.

This report presents the results of the first phase of a project designed to understand the current uses, perceptions, and experiences of the digital humanities at McMaster.

Research Questions:

- 1) How do individuals perceive the digital humanities and experience the process of implementing DH initiatives? (What are their motivations for engaging DH approaches? What are the perceived benefits & challenges?)
- 2) How are the digital humanities currently being used at McMaster University for teaching and learning/pedagogical purposes? Are they being used for other purposes?
- 3) How do the objectives of the current digital humanities initiatives at McMaster University compare or align with the objectives commonly described within the pedagogical literature?

Methodology:

Following ethics clearance, Department Chairs and Department Administrators within the Faculty of Humanities were sent an email containing an invitation to participate in an online survey containing both closed- and open-ended questions. The Chairs and Administrators were asked to forward the email to the faculty, sessional instructors, and graduate students within their departments.

Respondents:

Number of Respondents: 22

Department:

- Art History: 1
- Classics: 1
- Cognitive Science of Language: 2
- Communication Studies: 1
- English and Cultural Studies: 3
- French: 1
- History: 4

- Linguistics: 2
- Philosophy: 6
- Theatre and Film: 2
- Gender Studies and Feminist Research: 1
- No Response: 2

*NOTE: Participants were allowed to check all departments that applied, and some do teach in more than one department

Employment Status:

- Sessional: 5
- Tenured Professor: 7
- PhD Student: 7
- MA Candidate: 2
- No Response: 2

*NOTE: Participants were allowed to check all employment statuses that applied. Some may have identified as both graduate students and sessional instructors, for instance.

Experience Teaching at the University Level:

- 0-5 Years: 10
- 6-15 Years: 5
- 16-25 Years: 3
- More than 25 Years: 2
- No Response: 2

Key Findings:

Definitions: Common Themes

Participants were asked about their understandings of the digital humanities. A number of key themes emerged from their responses:

- DH as a support or enhancer to teaching and learning
- DH as making use of technology
- DH as an 'empty phrase'
- DH as something that is attractive to students

Overall, participants offered very passive descriptions of using DH in the classroom.

Uses and Functions in Participants' Discipline: Common Themes

Participants suggested that DH tools and processes fulfilled a number of roles connected to research and teaching in their disciplines:

- Supporting/facilitating visualization of information
- Permitting organization of data and information
- Enabling particular kinds of analysis

At the same time, some suggested that uses of the DH tended to be shallow, and or served to decrease/deemphasize literacy.

Goals of Digital Humanities Practitioners: Common Themes

Participants described several aims they sought to fulfill by drawing on the DH in their teaching. These included:

- Promoting collaboration
- Making information publically available
- Enhancing engagement and accessibility for students

Most commonly mentioned benefit: Allowing students to develop digital literacy (81.3% of the 16 respondents to this question selected this benefit)

Next Steps:

A second phase of the study, involving semi-structured interviews with DH practitioners at McMaster, sought to explore these issues in more detail and learn more about current DH projects underway at the university. The team is currently in the process of writing and editing a multimedia essay which will summarize the results of both these interviews and the survey data. This essay will be publicly available at <https://macblog.mcmaster.ca/dhped/> shortly.