

THE DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP TRAINING PROGRAMME AT BRITISH LIBRARY

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INTRODUCTION

Research libraries and cultural heritage institutions must ensure that staff skills and core competencies keep pace with a rapidly changing research environment if they are to continue to effectively support and engage with scholars¹. The American Council of Learned Societies Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities & Social Sciences (ACLS 2006) observes that:

In recent practice, “digital scholarship” has meant several related things:

- a) Building a digital collection of information for further study and analysis
- b) Creating appropriate tools for collection-building
- c) Creating appropriate tools for the analysis and study of collections
- d) Using digital collections and analytical tools to generate new intellectual products
- e) Creating authoring tools for these new intellectual products, either in traditional forms or in digital form

The British Library is realigning its services and structure and in 2010 the Digital Scholarship department was established with a remit to ensure the Library develops its strategy and service propositions to enable and support these digital scholarship activities. The Digital Curator team was created within it to build the staff capacity to deliver on this strategy and ensure that the entire collections workforce is fully versed in the opportunities that digital content and new technologies can offer. This paper discusses the design and implementation of our in-house Digital Scholarship Training Programme at British Library.

TRAINING OBJECTIVES

An important first step in shaping our training initiative was the establishment of four clear objectives for what we hoped to achieve for colleagues, and by extension Library users.

1. Staff across all collection areas are familiar and conversant with the foundational concepts, methods and tools of digital scholarship.

Outside the purview of digital scholarship were courses in basic computer literacy: this training was already available to staff through Human Resources.

2. Staff are empowered to innovate.

Seb Chan (Cooper-Hewitt Museum) and Rob Stein (Dallas Museum of Art) stress that innovation can come from anywhere within an organisation and institutions should be careful to avoid erecting unintentional barriers by allotting space and resources too selectively². Our programme would

¹See also Martin Weller's *The Digital Scholar: How Technology is Changing Academic Practice*
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849666275>

² From their talk *Bootstrapping Innovation in Museums* at Museum Ideas 2012
<http://openobjects.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/war-plague-and-fire-and-bootstrapping.html>

underscore that staff across the Library have the power to innovate, and would provide the support to do so.

3. Our internal capacity for training and skill-sharing in digital scholarship are a shared responsibility across the Library.

Within the organisation, there are areas of world-class expertise in digital content, research, and scholarship. The programme must leverage and amplify this by working with these staff to develop and deliver course modules.

4. Collaborative digital initiatives flourish across subject areas within the Library as well as externally.

The training programme would open up direct communication between colleagues across subject areas as well as digital scholars, ensuring opportunities for collaboration and improvements on service arise.

DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT

In April 2012 the Digital Curator team embarked on an intensive three-month survey of the current digital scholarship landscape.

Having conducted a literature survey, the team sought out scholars working at the intersection of computing and scholarship and joined them for informal chats about their research³. Perhaps inevitably, we were frequently drawn to activities within the field of Digital Humanities, its very existence the embodiment of trends towards more digital scholarly practice in academia⁴. We consulted the proceedings of major conferences across Europe such as Digital Humanities 2012 in Hamburg and the Digital Humanities Congress 2012 at University of Sheffield and surveyed the skills which academics were acquiring by attending pertinent training courses⁵ and reviewing open syllabi⁶ and course materials⁷.

By August 2012 the team had outlined the specific concepts, methods and tools which were of direct relevance to library staff. We initially considered taking an advisory approach whereby we would point staff to externally available training opportunities in the areas we had outlined, but found this would not suffice in meeting our objectives; existing courses were by-and-large written for academics or the private sector and the cost of sending a preponderance of staff on them was prohibitive.

³ Several groups meet regularly in the immediate vicinity of British Library such as Decoding Digital Humanities London (DDHL) <https://sites.google.com/site/ddhlondon/> and the Bloomsbury Digital Humanities Group.

⁴ Texts such as *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (2004) <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companion/> and *A Companion to Digital Studies* (2007) <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companionDLS/> were highly influential in the early formation of the department as well as the initial framing of the training offering.

⁵ Digital.Humanities@Oxford Summer School <http://digital.humanities.ox.ac.uk/dhoxss/>

⁶ A brief collection of DH-related syllabi has been helpfully collate here: http://commons.gc.cuny.edu/wiki/index.php/DH_Syllabi

⁷ Tooling Up for Digital Humanities at Stanford <http://toolingup.stanford.edu/>, David Birnbaum's <http://dh.obdurodon.org/>, and Research Information Network's Social media: A guide for researchers <http://www.rin.ac.uk/our-work/communicating-and-disseminating-research/social-media-guide-researchers> are notable examples.

This informed our decision to design and deliver our own curriculum in-house and we subsequently drafted individual briefs and learning outcomes for what would become our core offering of 15 one-day courses. Each of the three Digital Curators took responsibility for managing five of the courses and worked with our internal advisory board and instructors from within the Library and institutions on the leading edge of digital scholarship such as King's College London, Open University, University College London and University of Oxford to finalise the courses.

Instructors were asked to consider the following when preparing course materials:

- Content should be aimed at “intelligent novices”, that is, staff who have heard about the concepts but haven't had the time, space or opportunity to explore them in any depth.
- Focus on the wider concepts, methods and processes which tools enable rather than teaching to the tools.
- Include a hands-on practical element wherever possible, preferably using British Library digital content.
- Deliver from the library practitioner perspective and highlight the Library's current work, or potential for such work. It is crucial that staff clearly connect the relevancy of this new knowledge to their role at the Library.
- Deliver a one-day workshop onsite rather than online. Courses would not be held online as that could unnecessarily alienate an audience with varied technical skills. A full-day commitment would also provide necessary time and mental space away from business-as-usual activities while underscoring this development is a priority.

THE CURRICULUM

We launched the two-year programme officially in November 2012 and the first of four planned semesters ran through the end of March 2013 with these fifteen courses:

101	What is Digital Scholarship?
102	Digital Collections at British Library
103	Digitisation at British Library
104	Communicating our collections online: Copyright considerations and Opportunities
105	Crowdsourcing in Libraries, Museums and Cultural Heritage Institutions
106	Text Encoding Initiative
107	Data Visualisation for Analysis in Scholarly Research
108	Geo-referencing and Digital Mapping
109	Information Integration: Mash-ups, API's and Linked Data
110	Social Media: Introduction to the Library's Social Media Policy, Twitter and Blogging
111	Working collaboratively: Using the British Library Wiki, Yammer and Google Drive
112	Presentation skills: From Powerpoint to Prezi
113	Foundations in working with Digital Objects: From Images to A/V
114	Behind the Screen: Basics of the Web HTML, CSS, XML
115	Metadata for Electronic Resources: Dublin Core, METS, MODS, XML

The content of each was carefully designed to specifically suit the Library's point-of-view. For example, the course 'Information Integration: Mash-ups, API's and Linked Data' provided a broad overview of the terms⁸, but also stressed to staff the immediate potential for these technologies in

⁸ As one attendee remarked, “Great to have something often referred to demystified!”

connecting our digital content with external sources. A practical hands-on exercise⁹ walked them through accessing our own British National Bibliography API as a digital scholar might and highlighted its potential as a rich resource for answering complex research questions. The exercise also showcased how our data formats helped or hindered such queries, providing a useful perspective for staff who may create API's in future.

EARLY PROGRESS & LESSONS LEARNED

A total of 86 staff members took part in the first semester, attending an average of 2.7 courses. Nine courses were led by external instructors, while the remaining six were taught by British Library staff. Feedback was captured via free text evaluation forms collected at the end of each course which have given us some good indications about what has worked and what needs addressing in the next semester.

- When asked what they enjoyed most on any given course, staff consistently noted they valued time to freely brainstorm ideas with colleagues.
- The inclusion of practical hands-on activities alongside lectures was also highly valued. Highly structured exercises with clear step-by-step directions were favoured over unstructured time devoted to free exploration of tools.
- We set course capacities too ambitiously which made them a challenge to deliver. We reduced capacities from 30 to 15 for courses with hands-on exercises.
- Courses which are tool-based, for example 110 Social Media, will be broken into discreet modules so participants need only attend the sections they require.
- Curators were given first priority on all courses initially as we had considered them our target audience. We changed this policy shortly after launch and opened courses to all interested staff as there was little justification for maintaining a waiting list in light of such positive demand.
- Initial take-up has benefited from a core of early adopters and new hires. As this demographic complete the courses, we will need to be more strategic and creative in marketing the programme to those less inclined.
- How we capture information now will be crucial for gauging impact over the long-term. Several attendees have alerted us to project ideas they intend to take forward and we must ensure a mechanism is in place to log and monitor such activities¹⁰.

This short paper reports on this model and our experience with the hope that it may be useful for similar institutions.

⁹ See the full exercise here: http://www.meanboyfriend.com/overdue_ideas/2013/02/introduction-to-apis/

¹⁰ Phil Hatfield, Curator of Canadian & Caribbean Studies, attended several of the courses and is now formally taking forward a project to visualise a portion of his collection: "We have a large collection of Canadian photographs and associated data at the Library and I'd been considering for some time now ways in which to work with them beyond simply hosting them in a typical image gallery. The course on Data Visualisation gave me the space to play around with some of my ideas for visualisations and pointed me in the direction of free tools out there such as Google Fusion Tables. I hadn't realised it was so easy to get started and was able to see the shape of the collection almost immediately."

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