

The Values of Digital Scholarship

Digital scholarship (DS) is being produced in multiple disciplines. There's a lot of emphasis on specific digital scholarship skills: learning to code, learning to work with a particular tool or program. But no single coding language or platform that encompasses all the practices. Because the Demystifying Digital Scholarship workshops are for people from multiple departments, with different backgrounds and experience, the curriculum foundation is a set of the values that motivate digital scholarship and shape discussions.

Much of the activity around digital scholarship is responsive to external situations. One such situation is the lack of funding in higher ed. Another situation is the lack of traditional tenure-track professorships available, and the hope that becoming proficient with digital research skills will help graduate students and junior academics find more job opportunities inside and outside of the academy.

Arguably, then, digital scholarship is both a set of methods and a movement. Many practitioners are concerned with their particular research area, and with critiquing and improving the university as a whole. This is because practices and tools involved in DS have great potential to impact colleges and universities' infrastructure. Online courses can make education more accessible when well-designed, but can also become a source of profit that benefits the institution more than its students. Collecting data can lead to new insights, but can also raise ethical questions about who owns the data, and how it will be used.

Adaptive: Motivated by the view that the practices for knowledge production, publishing, reading, and writing, are changing, and that these changes affect the scope of professional academics' work and responsibilities.

Sustainable/resource-aware: Thinking proactively about how a resource, project, or skill will be used. This thinking involves consideration of what will be necessary for its long-term effectiveness, or might result in planning projects that are deliberately ephemeral, and have a low resource cost.

Multimodal: Involving multiple modes (both image analysis and written commentary, or an essay published in a format that is designed to be navigated in different ways); produced in multiple or alternative media formats that result in a variety of types of audience engagement.

Interdisciplinary: While interdisciplinarity is not a requirement, many digital scholarship projects borrow or blend aspects of multiple fields. Text and data analysis projects may require statistical knowledge, while other projects blend literature and historical studies with geographical information.

Auto-didactic: Willingness to independently learn a skill or technique that falls outside of the traditional boundaries of your field, and which you may need to teach yourself (or make arrangements to learn). Examples: statistical data analysis, programming languages.

Collaborative: The complexity of some research questions may require working with partners who have expertise in other disciplines, or industry partners. A project might begin with autodidacticism, and become collaborative as the project grows in size. Alternately, a project that involves looking at how users interacted with a particular tool, text, or site, would benefit from having investigators from multiple schools or communities.

Ad hoc: 1) Experimental, either in pursuit of serendipitous discovery or due to the lack of a single best practice; 2) focused on solving a problem or meeting a particular need.

Process & product-driven: Digital scholarship treats both the final product and the process of creating it as equally valuable and worthy of commentary and dissemination. Challenges and even failures are valuable, provided that they are presented in a way that can contribute to others' work.

Accessible: Digital scholarship is often linked with the open-source and open-access technology movements, which advocate for making products freely available for use and modification, and for making code that determines exactly how a program functions easily visible. An equally important aspect of accessibility involves making resources (printed, digital, or other formats) fully useable by people who have visual processing disorders or other disabilities that affect their use of resources. The wealth of information available on the web can be made accessible to audiences with varying abilities if content producers are thinking actively about accessibility from the start.

Public & transparent: Public scholarship, which involves and engages people and places outside of the academy, is its own field. It overlaps with digital scholarship because a common component of digital scholarship is the preservation of texts/objects/information that is public property; and because public scholarship allows for greater advocacy of the importance of scholarship.

Project-oriented: Digital scholarship is substantially project-based: set a goal, determine how to accomplish the goal, document your results (whether success or failure), and disseminate them to an audience. The scope and type of project can vary: one project might go on for years, while another is a month's work. A project might be about analyzing a set of data with a particular tool, researching potential audience engagement, or learning a new skill (i.e., using Tumblr).

Social: Who else is working on topics related to yours? Who will the audience for your work be? How will you reach that audience and build interest in your project(s)? What might you discover when you start communicating your goals? These are all questions that you might ask as you start learning about digital scholarship, and especially if you begin planning a digital project.

This list of values isn't a rulebook, or a manifesto. Each of the values is subject to ongoing discussion among people who are doing digital scholarship. Moreover, each value is highly likely to evolve in practice over time. Thinking about which values resonate -- or which ones you are skeptical about -- can help you follow debates about digital scholarship, and decide which aspects you want to explore further.