Working with Digital Humanities

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Working with Digital Humanities: Sectoral Concerns and Cross-sectoral Collaborations

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As an explicitly transdisciplinary idea, digital humanities provides opportunities to bring together people and interests across the sectors, from a variety of scholarly and practical disciplines, and from the society at large. It may not be crucial that everyone has an identical understanding what digital humanities is if the stakeholders have shared or compatible concerns, and practical respect each others priorities. This applies to research questions and practical inter- ests as well as their projected significance. The compatibility of concerns and mutual understanding of each others priorities is not, however, something that would be given in a collaboration or dependency relation that crosses different disciplines and sectors. To give a few examples, problems may occur when de- veloping and borrowing digital tools from across contexts to address research questions from the humanities disciplines, when the limits of digital approaches to address specific questions are negotiated within and between contexts, and increasingly, when digital humanities researchers are using data provided by and originally produced in other sectors and situations. Even if the digital human- ities literature in general and, to a verying degree, individual research projects have emphasised the importance of being critical and sensitive to the implica- tions of using borrowed and newly developed technologies and understanding the data, so far, there is relatively little empirical research on the implications of cross-sectoral collaborations.

The aim of the presentation is to systematise observations on various prob- lems relating to cross-sectoral collaborations in the context of digital humani- ties. It draws from an empirical study of archaeological documentation practices in Sweden and an analysis of the perspectives the stakeholders of archaeolog- ical information. Archaeology is an example of a discipline within which the cross- sectoral collaboration has always been significant and has increased in the post-war years due to the heritage legislation that mandates archaeological investigations before land use [1]. At the present, these investigations are pro- ducing unprecedented amounts of digital documentation data with a significant scholarly potential. In a large number of countries the majority of archaeologi- cal fieldwork is currently financed by land developers as an obligatory exercise regulated by the law. Even if the priorities and wordings vary from one country

to another (e.g. [2]), the principal purpose of archaeological fieldwork is to produce an adequate documentation of an archaeological site for future research. In Sweden, the purpose is three-fold (in this particular order) as to document an archaeological site, take care of finds, to report and communicate (mediate) the results. Moreover, the documentation material and finds shall be preserved for the future, be scholarly interpreted and placed in a cultural historical con- text [4]. What is crucial, however, is that the fieldwork itself and where it is conducted is not initiated by a scholarly interest but a need or want to develop land. Further, the financing that is coming from the land developers has an inevitable influence on the priorities of conducting fieldwork, and an interest in a part of the results.

According to the analysis of the empirical material, a major question for contemporary archaeological practices is how well the current information process is capable providing meaningful information for the different stakeholders and even more importantly, what are its implications to the usability and usefulness of the information, and collaborations between stakeholders in the different sectors. Are the matters of concern [3] of the other parties understood by the individual stakeholders and what are the consequences of understanding and not understanding them? Even if the principal conclusion of the analysis so far is that there is much to be done to help the different parties to understand each other and each others priorities in cross-sectoral collaborations, it is equally ap- parent that many of the significant issues are relatively common organisational and collaborative challenges documented in the literature. They are not specific to archaeology or even to digital humanities.

References

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[3] Bruno Latour. Why has critique run out of steam? from matters of fact to matters of concern. Critical Inquiry, 30(2):225–248, 2004.

[4] Riksantikvarieämbetet. Riksantikvarieämbetets föreskrifter och allmänna råd om uppdragsarkeologi. Kulturrådets författningssamling KRFS 2015:1, Stockholm, 2015.