

Change Agents out of place Organizational Ambidexterity and Embeddedness as Key Concepts for DH Units in Humanities Institutions

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The Digital Humanities community is committed to its vision of reshaping (revolutionizing) existing concepts and practices. At the same time, any research institute in the humanities is committed to the specific traditions in which it operates, and it will strongly tend to refuse to deviate arbitrarily from its present methods and structure. Hence, in the face of the digital transformation both are searching for new institutional structures – the former in order to act, the latter in order to react – and, as a result, they find themselves amid the “wave of interest in DH centers and labs” (Antonijević 2015, 132). These DH units have developed scholarly practices, built research infrastructures and reached a state of institutionalization for the digital humanities (Oiva and Pawlicka-Deger 2020). From this strong and confident position, the DH units could devote themselves to the future task of changing the humanities organizations of which they are a part. DH groups, labs, centers are primed to contribute the transformation of their superordinate departments, institutes, faculties as core skills and values from the DH map the requirements of organizational development.¹

For an organization to evolve while remaining true to its mission and continuing successful practices is the capacity for “organizational ambidexterity” based on the economic principle of balancing “exploration and exploitation” (March 1991). Adapted for a DH unit in a humanities institution, this requires a mode of action, which develops innovative and forward-looking ideas and exposes them to existing practices, without rejecting, opposing, or ignoring them – but to evolve them. Such a methodology-driven change process combines pragmatic solutions with strategic goals. For example, for colleagues from traditional disciplines, a meaningful contribution to their projects right now could be a data publication concept or the automation of a workflow – an “incubator process” (Fraistat 2019) instead of an overhaul of the methodology to advance formal modeling of the historical research question. The former will still be a valid contribution to the latter, if pursued as a long-term goal continuously by the DH unit. The concurrence of supportive tasks, such as infrastructure development or data management, and independent research, often a tension in institutional DH units (Edmond 2016), becomes an advantage here.

In this context, we propose the concept of an institutional DH unit serving as a change agent in a humanities organization and focuses on acting – in the mode of action that emanates from its own base but operates out of place – in the traditional humanities. This represents an extension to the centralized, networked or consortial models (Anne et al. 2017), which successfully propelled

the institutionalization of the DH and may also lead beyond to on “infrastructure of engagement” (Pawlicka-Deger 2020). If the DH unit is intended to contribute to the evolvement of a whole organization, its members need to be “embedded” in the traditional research processes rather than only creating new structures. (Inter-)actions could include: a) supporting tasks providing value to both DH units and a traditional project; b) small collaborations visible in both (DH and H) communities; c) regular visits and event-based exchange between institutional units as well as representation in institutional committees, seminars, and colloquia. Thus, by engaging with traditional research instead of remaining detached, spatially and methodologically, the DH unit seeks to actively rebuild the institutional environment (Earhart 2015) and to diffuse digital methods so that they can “become part of the general toolkit of humanistic inquiry” (Romein et al. 2020, 293) while benefiting from and contributing to the rich research themes of the humanities.

As a prerequisite, DH units needs an appropriate level of autonomy and environment to develop innovative ideas and pursue experimental approaches through collaboration within their own circle – “to ensure that we do not lose our pioneering spirit” (Prescott 2015, 473). Spatial concepts remain fundamental to digital humanities research (Pawlicka-Deger 2021) and for acting as change agents in the humanities, DH has to leave its gatherings, sweet spots and comfort zones and get back in traditional settings – as self-confident representatives of the DH, carrying it’s open and collaborative mindset. While DH capacities for the digital transformation of humanities research can be explored in newly established DH labs, they can first be fully realized when embedded in traditional structures.²

Notes

1. Our own DH Unit, the DH Lab at the Leibniz Institute of European History (IEG) in Mainz, Germany, which is tasked with developing digital methods and providing research support across the institute’s various research units, serves as an example for reflection. Neither is this unit intended to be a blueprint, nor have all concepts and principles already been successfully applied.
2. With this poster application we seek to foster the discussion about organizational development in the DH. As this field has a wide range of institutionalized units, we aim to learn from and contribute to these use cases.

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