Digital Humanities: An Exploration of a New Digital Humanities Programme in Higher Education and its Meaning Making by Community Partners

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INTRODUCTION

Today we live in a rapidly evolving environment supported by high-quality technology and fast communication, which has impacted professional, commercial and academic aspects of the society. In higher education there is a constant need to keep respective fields up-to-date with the changing needs of the society. A comprehensive approach to address this challenge is the creation of interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary programmes. The field of Digital Humanities (DH), lying at the intersection of humanities and computing is such an example which may be instrumental in creating the change by serving as a platform for novel interdisciplinary connections to address societal challenges. DH has been identified as a tool that assists in furthering research, studies and collaboration between distantly related fields which have not been connected conventionally in the discipline of humanities (e.g., Kirshenbaum, 2010).

Further, higher education and its array of offerings is influenced by market economies. For example, Newman, Couturier and Scurry (2010) study the dynamics of market influences on higher education and point to the inevitable transformations due to agendas of political parties, public policies, corporate goals and market structures. Recent EU political discussions emphasize the need for addressing societal needs through fields like DH, where Humanities and Social Sciences are viewed as "essential to maximise the returns to society from investment in science and technology" (European Commission, 2016).

Higher education is viewed as central to the objectives of public and private institutions and related economic development, employment, skills development and talent acquisitions. The development of new courses with a unique course offering helps to position the universities and higher education institutions differently from the others and helps counter global competition. The local community stakeholders can provide assistance in identifying the required set of skills for the job market. They can guide on how interdisciplinary connections can be built up so as to expand the possibilities. Not the least, courses and programmes informed by actual needs will enable the highly skilled professionals, whose education has been markedly enhanced by practice-informed education and joint, cross-sector innovation, to address future societal challenges. All this is applicable to the field of humanities and the newly evolved Digital Humanities.

METHODOLOGY

The paper reports on a pilot study undertaken with the purpose of informing the developments of DH courses at Linnaeus University (LNU) in the way that reflects actual societal needs, based on input from the relevant stakeholders in the LNU region encompassing south-eastern Sweden. To this purpose, a focus group interview of representatives from relevant public institutions and organizations was conducted. While the invitation was sent out to 9 representatives from the LNU's DH Initiative network (https://lnu.se/en/research/searchresearch/digital-humanities/), 4 were able to attend the focus group interview, and 1 provided his views via an email interview. The five participants represented:
1. Kulturparken Småland (encompassing the biggest group of local cultural venues, http://www.kulturparkensmaland.se/1.0.1.0/108/1/) in Växjö,
2. Kalmar Castle (http://www.kalmarslott.se) in Kalmar,

3. Det fria ordets hus (The House of Free Speech, http://www.vaxjo.se/-Det-fria-ordetshus-/Om-Det-fria-ordet-hus/) in Växjö, and
4. AV Media Region Kronoberg (publically financed institution for media and IT in schools, http://avmedia.kronoberg.se).

The focus group interview and the email interview were of a structured type and comprised 11 questions, grouped around the following 4 subsections:
1. Views about DH as a general topic and as the specific LNU initiative;
2. Relevance of DH to the Linnaeus University region;
3. The skills and talent pool in the market in relation to DH; and,
4. Points of attention for the DH project to aid needs of the society and local industry.

RESULTS

The participants largely agreed that DH is a very broad topic that needs concrete references to applications in order to relate it to various industries. DH can be both a method and a way of thinking and can be used in optimal ways to engage people and customers in their work and social engagement; for the latter, it is important to devise new modes of participation of end users in order to collect their ideas and interests, and create new content. The LNU DH Initiative was hailed as an excellent idea allowing for cross-sector collaboration, and for humanities to connect to computing and business disciplines more substantially.

The overall perception was that the Linnaeus University region needed to be developed in many sectors, ranging from business, culture, education, innovation etc. The project could contribute to and engage with society through schools, museums and other public platforms. Sustainability of the DH Initiative would need to be addressed. The respondents had a consensus that strategic thinking, though very important, was largely lacking in the overall societal development and in the related plans in the local municipal bodies. The DH programme was therefore recommended to include education related to strategy and strategic thinking. The DH programme is also expected to include communication skills building and working in multidisciplinary teams. Finally, the respondents pointed out that as a higher education provider in Sweden it was important to remember that the DH programme needs to keep the three pillars of Education, Research and Engagement with Society as primary in their course development.

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