

Learning from the Experts On-Site: A Short Term Digital Humanities Study Abroad Framework

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Digital humanities is at its best when it focuses on shared expertise and connecting communities to their past, present, and future. This poster will present a digital humanities study abroad program for undergraduate students that brings students into contact with people and institutions in the area of digital cultural heritage and challenges the students to create DH work in collaboration with one another and informed by their conversations with local experts.

Short term study abroad programs that incorporate digital humanities methods almost exclusively come from within the disciplines. In these programs, mapping is the most common digital humanities method adopted during the program, since it orients students to their location of study and extends the student journaling practices to a new format (Apgar 2018, Free / Ingram 2018, Dessein / Urlaub 2020). Other study abroad programs have students work on ongoing DH projects on-site as an extension of work done on campus (Thom et al. 2020). By contrast, this study abroad program places DH at the center and incorporates exposure and practice with multiple DH methods through assignments and meetings with DH project leaders and practitioners.

Technology, Humanities, and the Arts has run annually since 2016 (except 2020-2021), bringing between six and nine students from Michigan State University in the US to the UK for four weeks. Originally taking place entirely in London, the program now spends two weeks in London and two weeks in Scotland (based in Edinburgh). Open to students from any discipline at any point in their undergraduate studies and incorporating a general education requirement, the program attracts an exciting variety of students, nearly all of whom are entirely new to digital humanities.

The program is oriented around bringing students into contact with cultural institutions and the people who work at/with/for them. By meeting with people who work behind the scenes in museums, libraries, and archives, students learn about the labor and decisions that go into cultural heritage preservation, digitization, and discovery. Since we meet with people who work at a number of universities in the UK, students learn about digital humanities - its contours, concerns, and the challenges its practitioners face. In many ways, it is a stealth Introduction to DH course, taught in collaboration with colleagues from around the UK and across institutions.

While on-site, students completed two small-scale digital humanities projects. One involved researching the neighborhood where the students were living in London and creating tours of the neighborhood using Curatescape. This project was done in small groups and challenged students to curate a tour with a specific audience in mind, to gather audio material to supplement their descriptions, and to find material from digital cultural heritage collections to serve as sources for tour stops. Class visits to institutions that served as collection sources (e.g. London Metropolitan Archives),

helped students make connections between digital content and the people who manage and work with the material.

In the second on-site project, students created audio collections using Museum in a Box. These individual projects challenged the students to think about the use of audio - whether content they collected themselves or content found in digital collections - as a source for creative remix. We met with one of the founders of Museum in a Box, George Oates, to learn about its origin as a tool, its implementation in a range of contexts, and to brainstorm together how the students would create their own collections.

The format of a short study abroad program is both promising in its opportunity to bring students into contact with people and organizations they would not regularly encounter. Simultaneously, it can be daunting to introduce entirely new concepts, activities, and contexts to students in a compressed period with little classroom time. I have found that the most effective ways to navigate this challenge are: 1) to embrace imperfection; 2) to work with the students to learn as a community; and, 3) to collaborate with the people and institutions on-site to bring energy, expertise, and humanity to the study of the intersection of technology and culture.

There are opportunities for experientially-based study abroad in a range of cultural and geographic contexts. This program, and lessons learned through it, are available as a model for other institutions and educators to use in developing such programs.

Bibliography

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