Building Digital Capacities through Collaboration. The case of Proyecto Humboldt Digital (Havana/Berlin)

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Collaboration between cultural heritage institutions and research institutions is increasingly frequent in the field of Digital Humanities. In the Hispanic context, this kind of collaboration has sought to generate interdisciplinary knowledge around topics such as open access, metadata schemas, representation languages and standard formats to ensure a greater degree of interoperability, preservation, and reuse (Alvite-Díez & Barrionuevo 2020; Gutiérrez De la Torre 2020). However, collaboration is sometimes uneasy since it requires negotiating epistemological borders and different managing styles (Tabak 2017). Additionally, when it takes place at an international level, collaboration can also involve cross-cultural, linguistic, and political challenges, especially if the institutions and team members of the project are situated in countries of the Global North and Global South (Kelleher 2017; Alpert-Abrams, Bliss, & Carbajal 2019).

Funded by the cultural preservation programme of the German Foreign Office, the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and the Gerda Henkel Foundation, Proyecto Humboldt Digital (ProHD) is a four-year (2019-2023) international research cooperation. The project focuses on a transnational topic --Alexander von Humboldt's journey to Cuba-- to bridge the gap in the digitization of historical sources and to enable the transfer of knowledge between the Oficina del Historiador de La Ciudad de La Habana (OHCH) in Cuba and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (BBAW) in Germany.

The project attempts to overcome digitization biases in libraries and archives in Cuba: while in German and Polish institutions Humboldt's manuscripts have been cataloged, digitized and are accessible on the internet, many historical sources related to Humboldt and preserved in La Habana were difficult to access online before ProHD. For this reason, a workflow was designed to cover the following processes: selection, digitization, description with metadata, publication in a repository, transcription and encoding in TEI and online publication as a digital edition.

With this paper we would like to reflect on our strategy for building digital capacities –that is, learning new skills and methodologies at an individual and organizational level– through collaboration. Our strategy can be summarized in four main activities: 1. negotiating the project's goals and authoring together our selection criteria and digitization policies. 2. stablishing institutional agreements with all the cooperating partners to create a greater network. 3. translating existing software and documentation from German into Spanish and adapting our software to local needs. 4. providing online training and internal workshops on digitization and digital scholarly editing. In other words, our collaboration has not been limited to carrying out a technical workflow, but it continuously organizes the exchange of research activities and experiences and builds on a wide set of both internal (team oriented) and external (community oriented) training activities.

In its efforts to organize local networks of shared digital participation with neighboring institutions like the National Archive (Archivo Nacional de la República de Cuba) and the ILL (Instituto de Literatura y Lingüística "José A. Portuondo Valdor"), ProHD has faced common challenges in confronting traditional leadership of conservation-oriented institutions. At the same time, the Cuban project members have been successful in promoting the advantages of digital transformation through a service-oriented approach, providing concrete results through non-intrusive measures of conservation and enrichment of the archival resources through research and digital visibility. The strong position of the Cuban partner organization OHCH in the Cuban landscape of cultural heritage institutions has allowed ProHD to act not as a foreign, but as a local partner in promoting a change of mind and procedure. This has not come as a major shift of paradigm, but as a project-oriented, topic-based selection of corpus materials, both for manuscript digitization as well as scholarly editing.

While small in scale, ProHD has been able to coordinate institutions that otherwise rarely work together and establish a DH-specific network of dialogue of relevant impact, both on a professional as well as political level. It has also led the Cuban team to initiate similar projects on topics of their own interest. In conclusion, collaboration has allowed us to learn by doing (digitizing, describing, publishing, transforming, transcribing, editing, etc.) and, ultimately, it has transformed the institutions and individuals involved in the project.

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