

New pathways to research and library collaboration through remote technologies

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This paper explores the potential that Virtual Reading Rooms (VRRs) and Virtual Teaching Spaces (VTSs) offer for interdisciplinary collaboration between digital humanities researchers and library professionals. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, remote technologies have been employed by many collection-holding institutions, including research libraries, as an emergency response to lockdowns, partial re-openings, and ongoing disruption of movement. As academics, researchers, and students were prevented from getting physical access to collections due to the closure of libraries and archives, VRRs and VTSs constituted an alternative way of accessing physical materials digitally, without relying on digitisation.

In the post-Covid era, VRRs and VTSs become increasingly integrated into the existing service offering of institutions given the variety of benefits they have for researchers, students, and other users globally. More specifically, VRRs and VTSs provide human-mediated remote digital access to collections which do not depend on digitisation. Through the use of live streaming via hires visualisers positioned within physical research spaces, scholars, teachers or members of the public can view and digitally engage with an institution's heritage and cultural collections, asking for these to be positioned and repositioned by a member of staff, to enable their research. These are emerging and bespoke services which provide another means of user-responsive access to collection materials.

Research Libraries UK (RLUK), in collaboration with its partners, has been tracking the development of these services since 2020 and investigating their potential as digital research infrastructure. It has conducted three international studies exploring the institutional perspectives with regards to their creation and delivery as well as the academic perception and use of the services. This paper is based on the results of the two most recent studies (Kamposiori 2022a, Kamposiori 2022b) and aims to highlight the potential of remote technologies to provide new pathways for collaboration between library professionals and digital humanities researchers.

For the purposes of the first study, a survey was launched to document and understand the institutional processes in research libraries and archives for developing and delivering VRR and VTS services. This survey was completed by 22 institutions in the UK and Ireland, US, and Australia and, according to our findings, some library professionals were found to actively contribute to the work of the researchers participating in the consultation process. As reported by our participants, the delivery of a VRR session often entailed a lengthy preparation which included conducting their own research on the topic or material to be consulted. During the VRR session, it was common to point at the details in collection items and converse and interact with researchers about their projects or different elements in the material as well as recommend other related materials and repositories.

Thus, in several cases, the responsibilities that library staff members had during the delivery of VRR services were much more complex compared to the process followed during a usual in-person visit and resembled more those of a research assistant or partner. Also, it is worth noting that a wide variety of collections were being presented through these services. These ranged from archives and special collections to museum objects, and art collections while, sometimes, these were combined with data visualisations, demonstrating a cross-collection and format application. Finally, library professionals were frequently collaborating with academics in the delivery of VTS sessions for students.

As part of the second study, which aimed to explore the academic experience and perceptions of VRRs and VTSs, a survey was completed by 38 participants mainly from the academic and research community in the UK, but also from South Africa, Canada, Europe, New Zealand, and the US. Thinking about the disciplinary background, they were mainly from the Arts and Humanities- including Digital Humanities - and Cultural Heritage areas.

Based on our results, the academics, researchers, and students in this study who had previous experience of using VRRs and VTSs often reported on the positive impact that the services had for their research, teaching, and study. Regarding the reasons they were using the services, these were mainly for reference checking and to confirm document contents or relevance. Other popular reasons included to conduct original research when it was not possible to visit in-person, to conduct a preliminary survey of material in advance of an in-person visit, and to seek advice and knowledge from library and archive professionals.

Besides the more apparent benefits that VRRs and VTSs can offer to researchers, which can range from quick, reliable, and low-cost access to material that is not digitised or catalogued in detail to the opportunity to network and work closely with library staff, some examples revealed the innovative and creative possibilities through which VRRs can enhance research and teaching. For example, one participant expressed their interest in mixing traditional object-handling with VRR sessions as part of their teaching practice to increase student experience. Another argued about the potential of the VRR process to become part of artistic research, such as through featuring within live or screened performance that focuses on archives and collections, or practice-led research employing virtual and augmented reality technologies. Given that the employment of VRRs and VTSs by libraries and archives is very recent, there has been very little discussion in academic literature around the alternative uses of these technologies, including the collaborative potential they offer.

As institutions, such as research libraries, consider further developing their VRR and VTS services through, for example, including born-digital material in the collection types to be offered for consultation and running blended and hybrid sessions, the benefits to digital humanities research and teaching increase. So do the possibilities for collaboration which can lead to innovative research projects, while also offering the chance to researchers to contribute towards informing digitisation and other institutional processes, including the creation of digital humanities resources and tools. Through presenting the results of the two RLUK studies, this paper will aim to unpack the paths to interdisciplinary collaboration that VRRs and VTSs offer, including the opportunities and challenges these will entail for library professionals and researchers.

Bibliography

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