Reaching Out: What do Scholars Want from Electronic Resources?

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The potentials for teaching and learning using technology are tremendous. Now, more than ever before, computers have the ability to spread scholarship around the globe, teach students with new methodologies, and engage with primary resources in ways previously unimaginable. The interest among humanities computing scholars has also grown. In fact at ACH/ALLC last year, Claire Warwick and Ray Siemens et al. gave some excellent papers on the humanities scholar and humanities computing in the 21st century. Additionally, in the most recent version of *College and Research Libraries* (September 2004), a survey was conducted specifically among historians to determine what electronic resources they use. The interest in this is obviously growing, and the University of Michigan as both a producer of large digital projects as well as a user of such resources is an interesting testing ground for this kind of survey data. Theoretically, Michigan should be a potential model for high usage and innovative research and teaching. In many cases it is; nevertheless, when one looks at the use of electronic resources in the humanities across campus and their use in both the classroom and innovative research, it is not what it could be. The same is true at other universities. At many universities across the U.S. and Canada, including those with similar large scale digitization efforts, use remains relatively low and new potentials of electronic resources remain untapped. Why?

During 2004 and 2005, the *Text Creation Partnership* (TCP) project, one of the largest digital projects at the University of Michigan, has undertaken several studies to answer that exact question, specifically for its own resources but also including other similar projects. Rather than asking the question of what the humanities scholar is and wants, TCP has sought to answer what is inhibiting use of current resources and what can the community do to enhance their experience with already existing resources. With the help of the School of Information and Departments of English and History at the University of Michigan as well as the cooperation of librarians and scholars throughout the US, UK, and Canada, TCP has set out to determine how its databases and other similar resources are being used, what potentials scholars could see for use, what are the barriers inhibiting use, and what the community can do to reach out to those scholars who may not have used electronic technology as much as they perhaps could. The results have been divergent and quite interesting.

So far in this continuing study, the TCP has tried to cover as many bases as possible. Project staff and students at relevant departments have interviewed many relevant scholars in the field (both those who have used technology and those who have not), sent out surveys to faculty and students, held a focus group of University of Michigan faculty and two with faculty from outside the University of Michigan, completed interviews with faculty throughout the U.S. and Canada, created sample syllabi and educational materials for scholarly review, and surveyed the use of electronic resources and citations within scholarly literature. Responses have ranged tremendously. Some scholars see interface as the primary concern; such resources are not designed to do the kind of search they want. Others see selection as a problem; the materials that databases choose to select are too narrow to be of use to scholars outside that field or are too broad and produce too many results. Still others question the legitimacy of the source itself. How can an electronic copy be as good as seeing the original in a library? Other, more electronically oriented scholars, see the great value of accessibility of these resources, but are unaware of the added potential for research and teaching. The most common concern, however, is that scholars believe they would use these resources if they knew they existed. Many are unaware that their library subscribes to resources or that universities are sponsoring this kind of research. Others feel that there is no incentive within the university system for scholars to use these kinds of new resources. In all, the humanities computing community has a great deal to do to facilitate further use.

What kinds of things should the community do? Some answers are as simple as new interface tools and methods of interacting with the database itself. Yet, even more fundamentally, many feel that the community needs to raise awareness of these resources and create incentives to use them. Librarians can certainly be a part of this in helping to raise awareness among their local faculty. Faculty also need to be involved by raising awareness beyond their own community to those colleagues who may not be as aware of the potential for these kinds of resources. Some faculty suggested that the community work together to create even more grants, contests, or prizes to encourage innovative electronic publication and research. Others have suggested that, given time, researchers will realize the potential and use it.

These responses raise several questions. How should designers of electronic resources structure their databases to maximize use? How should librarians, scholars, and users of electronic resources reach out to the community to increase use? What obstacles are there in increasing use of technology in the classroom or in scholarly research? What role will such sources play in the future? How will this change the study of the

humanities? What benefits or detriments does it bring to the profession? What role does or should the humanities computing community play in all of this? By analyzing the data to these questions and by gaining insights from others, it is hoped that we can supplement and continue an ongoing dialog about what the community is, what it needs, and what should be doing either to change current practices or to enhance already existing ones. In all, there would seem to be much work to do to increase the potential of electronic resources in the humanities, and the questions and answers brought up in these surveys may help to focus thinking on many aspects of the profession.[1]

1. I would also like to thank Julia Gardner and Kathy Schroeder for conducting interviews among scholars and working on the survey materials for this project.

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