

Conference report on humanities perspectives

eResearch Australasia 2007

University of Queensland, Brisbane, 26-29 June 2007

Brian Opie and Alison Stevenson

Introduction

The eResearch Australasia conference was held at the University of Brisbane from the 26th to 29th July 2007. Funding from the REANNZ Capability Build Fund allowed us to attend in our capacities as:

- Executive Officer of Te Whāinga Aronui The Council for the Humanities; Senior Lecturer in English, Victoria University of Wellington, and member of VUW's e-Research Capability Sub-committee (Brian Opie).
- Director of the New Zealand Electronic Text Centre, member of Library Executive for Victoria University of Wellington and Board member for the Humanities Research Network (Alison Stevenson).

There were around 300 delegates at the conference which offered a full programme covering various aspects of eResearch and introducing the Australian National Collaboration Research Infrastructure Strategy. We attended a range of lectures and workshops, focusing on the implications and opportunities of eResearch:

- for humanities scholars (see pp. 3-5)
- for libraries and archives, and the development of the digital humanities (see pp. 6-8).

The conference also provided an ideal opportunity for a meeting between the New Zealand Council for the Humanities and the Australian Academy for the Humanities (see p.9).

Summary of outcomes

We found the conference very useful both for the programme of presentations and the opportunity to meet practising digital humanities professionals and librarians and other information professionals that are fully engaged with eResearch. Since returning from the conference we have:

- reported back on the conference to the Executive of the Council for the Humanities (Brian)

- reported back on the conference to VUW's E-Research Capability Subcommittee (Brian)
- presented a report on the conference to the Victoria University of Wellington Library Management Team (Alison)
- co-presented a workshop on Digital Humanities at the Humanities Congress (Alison) covering many of these issues.

Other positive outcomes of attending include:

- The New Zealand Electronic Text Centre has adopted some of the tools showcased at the conference (e.g. the Sakai virtual research environment for a collaborative project with members in both Wellington and Auckland).
- The development of Creative Commons New Zealand has benefitted from the greater understanding of developments in open content licensing in Australia.

Future actions

1. Survey

AAH colleagues described the benefits that are accruing from the ARC Humanities eResearch Survey, which is closely modelled on a survey conducted for the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK). The AAH has agreed to supply the Council with any NZ data from its survey, and will identify the degree to which the New Zealand data correlates with the overall dataset. A decision can then be made as to whether the data is sufficiently representative, or whether funding should be sought to undertake a similar survey in New Zealand. Local data would assist with devising appropriate capability building programmes in the humanities, and would also be valuable comparative information.

2. Trans-Tasman participation in events

Both organisations agreed that there was benefit in ensuring Australasian representation at events on both sides of the Tasman, and undertook to promote these opportunities to local scholars and amongst the Council and Academy staff.

3. Ad hoc events (e.g. Access Grid information sessions)

Both organisations agreed that a range of Australasian ad hoc events making use of advanced networks (e.g. Access Grid seminars) would be useful: discussions will continue in this area.

E-Research and the humanities: background

Brian Opie

Executive Officer, Te Whāinga Aronui The Council for the Humanities
and Senior Lecturer in English, Victoria University of Wellington

General sessions

- The semantic web transforms knowledge relationships, by emphasising collaboration over control of knowledge, interaction between researchers and communities of users, open access to knowledge as the default position.
- The seamless integration of authoring and publishing, and of print, audio and video in a variety of forms, is yet to be achieved.
- AustLit (Australian Literary culture) is a collection of digitised texts (literature, criticism, bibliographical records, publisher information etc) which is also a database capable of being used to produce many different subsets of items in the collection – for example, American publications of Australian literature, regional literatures, popular theatre from the late C18th, cross sections at particular historical moments, and so on.
- While considerable development in Australia is occurring in the creation of e-texts as the primary resource for digital humanities (described as “re-engineering of content”), the move to e-scholarship is slower.
- A preliminary report on the ARC Humanities eResearch Survey indicated that 41% of respondents engaged in solo research, 59% in collaborations (30% with academics in the same department). Collaborations increased with the second and third projects;
- user involvement leads to the democratisation of knowledge, which in turn may threaten humanities’ researchers’ claims to expertise.
- Developing a coherent e-research infrastructure requires supporting interdisciplinary research, building capability, and creating sustainable services. In the UK, arts, humanities and social sciences are not very visible in the take up of the new infrastructure.
- Working out the legal framework for e-research is critical. A basic problem is the lack of understanding of copyright law in the universities. Social, technical and legal factors are involved in the take up of research outcomes.
- Making technology usable for researchers who don’t want to be IT experts is necessary for increased adoption of e-research practices. A new kind of professional linking the ICT environment with researchers is needed.
- Capability development for individuals has to be matched by changes in management and organisational culture, facilitating networks of collaboration, encouraging innovation and accepting diversity.

Workshops

Two workshops on the final day of the conference had considerable importance for thinking about issues in e-humanities development.

Cultural Informatics Workshop

This workshop made explicit questions which underlay much of the conference: What is scholarly practice in the digital age? What practices, technologies are needed for scholarly work which is collaborative, interdisciplinary, cross-faculty and –institution? The legacy of competitive structures in universities was noted as an impediment to the development of this new modality of academic research.

The focus on the work of archivists was refreshing and important, because it underlined how, in digital humanities (but clearly in all knowledge work) the expertise required to preserve and make accessible the documents and other cultural objects on which humanities research is based is a critical part of the research process and an example of the collaboration between different kinds of expertise which is so constantly affirmed as one of the distinguishing marks of e-research practice.

It also emphasised the difficulty of distinguishing between infrastructure and knowledge in a digital environment. Examples were given of how researchers' needs led to tool development in digital archival work. Digital text analysis is enabling machine searching for relationships in documents which does not require understanding of the document. However, the work of mapping relationships is done by people, not technology, a point of major importance for humanities e-research.

Humanities Workshop

This workshop allowed for a considerable extension of an earlier session which provided a very preliminary report on the use in Australia of a survey designed in the UK to provide an assessment of e-research capability in the humanities. Conducted as an open-ended discussion, it brought out the following issues:

- the need for all new graduates to be trained in e-research practices and tools
- the importance of “champions”, that is, senior humanities researchers who provide encouragement and support for younger academics to undertake e-research
- that e-research training should be seen as an investment, not a cost to the individual
- that while ICTs are generally accepted, take-up of e-research tools by humanities academics and understanding of what tools are particularly valuable in humanities research is not high
- the mutual lack of understanding between humanities academics and IT experts
- the need for an e-research agenda to be established by the Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH)

- lack of training, support and collaboration is more an issue than availability of tools
- we need to know what the humanities community identifies as high or emerging needs in e-research
- the diversity of humanities disciplines means small and dispersed communities of expertise, limiting national-level planning and investment in infrastructure
- research centres could be linked in a network to create a shared vision, the provision of e-research tools across institutions, gain funding available for infrastructure development and collaboration.

Other observations

While Australian and UK policies, funding, and infrastructure for e-research are significantly advanced in comparison to New Zealand, those speaking to and for the humanities at the conference perceive the humanities to be marginal to e-research development. Some reasons are:

- the emphasis on science and science models for R&D and innovation of economic value
- the modern, print-based tradition of individual research in the humanities
- the large gap between those with IT expertise and knowledge of tool development in e-research and the majority of researchers in the humanities
- the disjunction between the aims of research assessment exercises and the need to acquire new capabilities and research practices to engage in e-research.

Libraries, archives and digital humanities: background

Alison Stevenson
Director New Zealand Electronic Text Centre

Implications and Opportunities of eResearch for Libraries

Managing Research Administrative Data

Institutional Repositories (IRs) are typically representative of scholarly outputs, not supporting all scholarly processes. How do IRs support academic reporting processes (i.e. RQF in Australia and PBRF in NZ) without compromising effective delivery of primary purpose - open access to research outputs? IRs do not meet the needs of managing administrative data.

Proposed solutions

- Option 1 Research admin data is just another type of publication so it is integrated into the Institutional Repository
- Option 2 Build a dedicated research admin data repository
- Option 3 Look for generic framework maintaining both types of data

Some issues discussed

- Size, volume (Large data)
- Type of access
- Differing needs of data sharing - Scholarly publication wanting to share output of scholarly output – researcher's collaborating requiring read/write access for publications and research.
- Federation identity management, access control.
- Selecting metadata schema(s) for research data.
- Preservation – Do we have the necessary skills and tools at this stage?
- Any professional development programs?

Main questions identified

- Do we need a separate repository?
- Are there any generic things we can use?
- How do we address the implications? A single repository, a shared repository with differing views, two different repositories, or even single storage layer with their own ingest /search layer?

Data Archives

E-research work both generates and requires the storage and management of increasingly huge amounts of data. Although there are some individually huge data sets (e.g. 30TB per astronomy simulation) most research data is still contained in small, manually managed sets. New services are required to curate and provide public access to publicly funded research data.

In Australia the Australian National Data Service (ANDS) has been established with this goal. In New Zealand the SSDASH project is working in the space but limited to Social Science data.

Who will run such services was a key issue for the Australian Librarians at the conference. This work requires technical solutions as well as skilled staff and significant cultural change. Librarians:

- could provide continuity of service, networks of useful relationships and expertise in managing intellectual property, privacy issues and provenance metadata
- but would require additional resources, and
- would need to combine information management skills with subject specific skills and technology developments.

Digital Humanities

There is an evolving partnership between researchers and digital libraries or collections of other digital resources. There are opportunities to engage in new form of work which can be generally described as “digital humanities”.

Digital libraries “provide the resources [to] offer intellectual access to...and ensure the persistence over time of collections of digital works... for use by a defined community or set of communities.” (Digital Library Federation).

Digital humanities takes these resources and works with them: “The digital humanities comprise the study of what happens at the intersection of computing tools with cultural artefacts of all kinds [and] how these common tools may be used to make new knowledge from our cultural inheritance and from the contemporary world” (Kings College).

The New Zealand Electronic Text Centre and the Humanities Research Network are both well placed to engage in this field and contribute to its development in New Zealand.

Useful quotes from a selection of speakers

eScience is about Scientists too – Dave De Roure

“Knowledge is not a layer on the top, it is all the way through the systems”

“Free the data, free the services, free the people”

“The details of the origins of data are as important as the values of the data. “
[the power of provenance]

“Data ‘in the wild’. Publish don’t warehouse. A little semantics goes a long way”

Thoughts on the future of scientific dissemination – Phillip Bourne

“Is a database really different from a journal? No.”

Going Digital: Humanities and the eResearch Revolution – Paul Arthur

“The humanities are now inescapably entangled with digital technology”

“The database is the aesthetic form of our era”.

All aboard, Destination: Seamless – Anne-Marie Lansdown (Innovation and Research Systems Group, DEST)

“If you care about the past you have to care about the data as well”

The challenges of research data management in institutional repositories – Anna Shadbolt, Eve Young

“What are the problems with data? – superabundance of quantity, formats, metadata, annotation, curation and preservation, sharing and use.”

Australia-New Zealand Collaboration in the Humanities: Meeting with the Australian Academy for the Humanities

The purpose of the meeting was to:

- update the AAH on KAREN, the Advanced Network Capability Building Roadmap and the wider NZ policy environment;
- gather information on the Australian environment, including documenting issues and barriers that could have an impact on KAREN uptake in NZ
- document capability building activities in Australia (current or planned) that may be useful models for NZ;
- identify common areas of interest and potential trans-Tasman collaborative projects, including areas in which humanities and cultural sector collaboration can be facilitated using advanced networks.

Points discussed included:

- The AAH is surveying humanities researchers in Australia during 2007-08 as part of a project funded through an Australian Research Council Linkage grant. The results of the survey will indicate current and emerging uptake of new research technologies and methodologies in the humanities in Australia. The survey builds on similar overseas work, e.g. a 2005 UK survey conducted by the University of Bristol. Some NZ scholars have responded to the Australian survey but the extent of NZ participation is not known.
- Initial results of the survey have been released: http://www.eresearch.edu.au/docs/270607/Sarah_Howard_John_Byron.pdf.
- A second part of the study is identifying priorities for digitisation of analogue research materials.
- Getting engagement from the community of humanities scholars is not easy. The e-Humanities Gateway in Australia relies on contributions but is not always up-to-date; it has been similarly difficult to get engagement in NZ with the Humanities Research Network site.
- There is a need for a coordinated and consensus-driven approach, particularly around funding: the humanities in Australia have not been successful in seeking funding under the NCRIS programme, perhaps for this reason.
- The biggest problem is awareness-raising – there aren't resources for doing this and academics don't have time themselves. What is needed is time from someone dedicated to business development and advocacy specifically in this area.
- Co-sponsoring events with Deans is a strategy that has worked in Australia.
- A lot of effort is going into working with centres of excellence, as they are obvious sites of innovation and collaboration.
- An obvious area of potential humanities involvement in e-research relates to geo-spatial systems.