#DLFteach • #DLFTeach Toolkit: Lesson Plans for Digital Library Instruction

Workshopping the Workshop: Moving Your Sessions Beyond Buttonology

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Introduction

Workshops are not tutorials, and yet, so often introductory sessions on digital humanities revert to pointing and clicking through particular tools. A basic text analysis workshop might introduce students by way of Voyant, for example. Tools-based introductions certainly have their place, but they can all too easily become about the GUI as opposed to the underlying concept they are meant to engage. John E. Russell and Merinda Kaye Hensley describe this approach as “buttonology” in “Beyond buttonology: Digital humanities, digital pedagogy, and the ACRL Framework,”¹ where they critique the focus in digital humanities training, specifically in libraries, on tools rather than meaningful engagement with digital methodologies. For the authors, the challenge remains how to encourage a more thoughtful approach to digital humanities instruction that foregrounds digital pedagogy and information literacy rather than a specific GUI or platform. They provide two broad recommendations: acknowledging the liminality of learning these methods and encouraging metacognition in workshops. To the first goal, they caution that learning new digital humanities methods is an uncomfortable experience for many researchers, that any workshop should try to create an open space for discussing anxieties, and that the use of visual learning exercises can help move beyond tools towards methods. To the second goal, they encourage the use of questions about the limitations of a tool or whether the results of a tool are meaningful can help open up broader discussions about the underlying methods and research questions. Ultimately, workshops in digital humanities should encourage a collaborative and reflexive approach to these methods that helps both experts and beginners engage meaningfully.

The workshop recommended here aims to take the critique of Russell and Hensley and offer a toolkit for helping library staff act upon it. In this workshop, we aim to raise awareness among participants about the kinds of digital humanities teaching they carry out and of which they are capable. In particular, it is meant to offer participants the chance to critique their own approach, to develop criteria for successful, lightweight workshops, and to develop a new prototype or idea that can then be executed at a later date.

Session Specifics

One-off workshop

Instructional Partners

Workshopping the Workshop offers a lesson in how to design a session with minimal technical background or overhead so as to encourage the design of a new, introductory digital humanities workshop as a learning opportunity. This workshop is meant to be very lightweight, implementable with a minimal amount of technical experience and in a variety of contexts, though the presenter

should be familiar with the concepts underlying the approach their workshop will investigate. In one form, it can be employed in conjunction with or for other units in the library that regularly engage in teaching so as to spread digital humanities literacy. But, because the aim is to promote workshops that can be successful for all audiences regardless of technical backgrounds, the workshop can also be used by advanced graduate students as a learning opportunity.

Audience

Teaching and learning librarians and advanced graduate students. No prior experience with digital humanities or particular technologies is necessary.

Curricular Context

There are two primary contexts for the workshop. First, institutions with regular workshop series on digital humanities tools and platforms can deploy the workshop to move the conversation beyond more specific, tool-based lessons and towards more conceptual and methods-based instruction. Second, institutions with interest in digital humanities but limited resources on campus can use the workshop to offer a model for the kinds of lightweight digital humanities instruction that can be maintained with minimal resources.

Learning Outcomes

Participants in the workshop will:

- Learn to think critically about the workshops and the learning outcomes they can offer related to digital technologies
- Gain a sense of concrete areas in which they can critique extant workshops so as to transition them away from platform and tool specific instruction and towards concepts and methods
- Feel empowered to use lightweight, low-tech workshops as learning opportunities for themselves and others

Preparation

Before the workshop, it may be good idea to solicit research interests from your particular group so that you can match your case studies and examples to topics relevant to your audience.

Materials

- Passages or materials for particular case studies if necessary
- Projector and computer for sharing prompts and facilitating discussion
- Pencil and paper

Session Outline

The general idea is to first introduce the concept of buttonology, give an example of a workshop that goes beyond buttonology to focus on concepts and methods, train the audience to identify areas for improvement in some case study workshops, and then give the workshop participants an opportunity to put the new concepts into practice using their own interests. Depending on time allowed for the workshop, you may cut one of the case studies or minimize discussion opportunities.

Introduce the idea of buttonology

At the beginning of the workshop, it is a good idea to frame the concept of buttonology for your audience. Besides offering the definition from Russell and Hensley, you may open with a broad discussion to move towards a definition of buttonology using the following questions:

- What workshops have you attended that felt useful? What made them so?
- What disasters have you seen or been a part of? What caused them?
- If you could have your students take away one thing from your workshops, what would it be?

Guiding questions such as these can help introduce not only the features of a workshop centered in buttonology but also the characteristics of alternatives — workshops that are engaged, concept-driven, and lightweight.

Case study: text analysis by pencil and paper

After introducing the concept of buttonology, we start by offering an example workshop that focuses on concepts and methods rather than on the tools or platforms themselves. In the example case study, Brandon has participants explore sentiment analysis concepts using pencil and paper.²

First, introduce the idea that you can assign numbers from -5 to 5 to represent the positive or negative emotional valence of a passage. Then have the workshop participants mark literary passages for these sentiments. Along the way, deploy a few questions to provoke discussion and draw out concepts:

- What are the obvious limitations in this work?
- Would you prefer to mark individual words or phrases?
- How do you decide what numerical value to give a particular word?

In this way, the participants can work inductively towards a number of concepts — the importance of training data, the difficulties of working with natural language — in machine learning without having any prior experience with statistics or programming.

Beyond Buttonology Exercise 1: Data Analysis and Visualization

For our first exercise, we outline some recommendations for an introduction to networks workshop that participants can modify for other data analysis and visualization methods such as text or image analysis. Usually workshops on networks focus on tools such as Gephi or Cytoscape, ideally enabling researchers to quickly create their own networks. Rather than first focusing on one of these tools, we ask participants to think about why researchers might want to utilize networks? What sorts of data can networks model and how can we evaluate these models? Starting with these questions helps participants think about the fundamentals of research and data analysis, especially experimental design (i.e. what's your hypothesis and how do you plan to test it?) and exploratory data analysis (i.e. what data do you have? How was the data collected? How is the data distributed?).

We can ask participants to fill out a survey and use that data as the basis of the exercise, or we can offer a few sample datasets and ask them to annotate them. Then participants can start sketching how they might connect attributes in the data to create a network. We can ask the group to brainstorm potential research questions and how we might evaluate those given the data. Ideally, starting from these questions helps participants think critically about the limits and possibilities of networks, and provides a better foundation for any future use of tools in their data analysis.

Beyond Buttonology Exercise 2: Archives

For a second case study, we approach a common workshop for digital humanities instructors. Given a request for a workshop on Omeka, a common platform for publishing scholarly collections and exhibits, a typical approach might use some sample data to offer participants a click-through tutorial

on the interface. With this as a basis for discussion, we ask participants to imagine a world in which Omeka has suddenly changed radically overnight—the platform has disappeared.

Rather than reinvent the same workshop again, what concepts and methods would you abstract from your Omeka workshop that you could use without worrying about sudden changes to the platform? Put another way—what foundational knowledge would you want a user to have before coming to Omeka to ensure that they could quickly and easily learn the tool themselves. Some examples might include:

- Metadata concepts
- Collection organization
- Material Presentation
- Contextualization

Given that we want a workshop to cover these goals, we ask the group to work in small groups to design an analog activity that might cover this material but that can be executed without digital means. As a further constraint, you can suggest that only a pencil and paper may be used as materials for the activity.

By starting with these concepts and then introducing the tool, audience members will have a stronger understanding of why the platform is necessary and how it can be used, even if the workshop itself does not cover the tool.

Workshop Prototyping

After having worked through some examples together, encourage students to apply the principles discussed in the workshop thus far to an activity or workshop that they already teach on a regular basis. The prompt might look something like this:

Take five minutes to practice applying the principles of this workshop:

- Write down a short description of an activity or workshop you already teach

- Identify two to three ways this lesson can be more engaged with concept or method as opposed to platform
- Draft a revised approach to the workshop that reflects this new approach
- Share

Group Discussion

After giving time for individual work on new workshop ideas, share with the group! Beyond asking people to share their new and exciting ideas, now is a good time to field questions about the approach more generally. You might use the following questions to help guide discussion:

- What are some common challenges that you identify in this approach?
- What are the advantages or disadvantages of this approach?
- Would this work for all audiences?
- We have deliberately tried to displace tools and platforms from the workshop, but we still need to teach them. Where or when might that happen in conjunction with a workshop like this?

Assessment

Success in this workshop can come in two forms. First, you can evaluate whether or not your attendees were successfully able to engage with and articulate points of critique in the case studies. This can additionally be measured during the discussion of their own workshop plans. Do the proposed workshops feel as though they center tools and platforms? Or do they favor low-tech approaches to concepts and methods? Secondly, the workshop can be evaluated from a curricular level. You might follow up with attendees weeks or months later to assess the degree to which they feel comfortable

enacting the workshops prototyped with you. If there is not already space in the curriculum for doing so, this event can be followed up with a workshop series meant to showcase and enact the workshops prototyped during your event. Following such a series, you might ask the leaders if they felt more comfortable leading these kinds of workshops, what they might do differently, and how their perspectives on the materials have changed.

Reflection

Tools are a foundational part of digital humanities research and training, but an overreliance on them can impede meaningful learning, especially for beginners who might struggle to distinguish the tool from the bigger picture. While teaching a tool might seem to empower learners, we have found that teaching a tool actually limits learning outcomes with students struggling to apply the method on their own. Furthermore, given that the continued maintenance and existence of these tools is not guaranteed, teaching a tool may leave students at a loss for how to implement a method if the tool is no longer supported.

Learning new tools, concepts, and methods all at once can be very intimidating, so in this piece, we recommend framing workshops in a way that separates these different components. Focusing on concepts and methods, we believe, empowers both instructors and learners from many backgrounds to explore digital humanities, and hopefully lowers the barrier for entry. This is true of students, but our goal in helping others to think of *teaching* in this way is to empower others to feel capable of teaching digital humanities workshops. By moving away from the idea that deep, expert knowledge in a field or tool is necessary for a workshop, we hope that workshops like these can redefine the terms of participation in the field.

References

Footnotes

1.

John Russel and Merinda Hensley, “Beyond buttonology: Digital humanities, digital pedagogy, and the

ACRL Framework,” *College; Research Libraries News* 78, no. 11 (2017). ↵

2. A version of this exercise can be found on [Brandon Walsh, “Text Analysis Workshop: Four Ways to Read a Text.”](#) Accessed July 26, 2017. ↵