UKSG

A day in the life of
a digital humanities network co-ordinator
Ruth Kirkham

A significant part of Ruth's job as Digital Humanities Network Co-ordinator at the University of Oxford is to work across and support the many different strands of digital humanities (DH) activity there.

Ruth takes us with her on a very varied and interesting day involving tea, books, camaraderie, chocolate brownies and exciting projects – what more could you ask for – and all set against the backdrop of Oxford.

Very rarely, my working day begins at 6:45 when the alarm goes off and I roll, unenthusiastically, out of bed. In reality, it normally starts much earlier with the arrival in our room of one (or both) of my young children, eagerly ready to start their day. This morning a nappy, football top, princess hair accessories and school uniform find their way, hopefully, onto the relevant child and I go downstairs in search of my first cup of tea. Things look better after that. There's then a jumble of bags, coats, shoes and toast and we leave for the childminder, where I drop the kids off before sprinting to the bus stop. This keeps me fit and usually means that I'm on my way into Oxford in reasonable time to start my working day.

Oxford hosts more DH research projects than any other institution in the UK. The projects, and the researchers who work on them, are spread much further than just the Humanities Division and its faculties, and many are the archetypes of collaborative and interdisciplinary work. A typical DH project focuses on the development of online resources, particularly complex multimedia databases, to facilitate answering research questions, and will often use the collections of the Bodleian Libraries and the Museums. Collaboration with IT Services, the Libraries, the Oxford e-Research Centre and the Oxford Internet Institute is increasingly required for effective research and technical development both at the application stage and once the project is awarded funding.

'the archetypes of collaborative and interdisciplinary work'

What that means for me is that I spend a lot of my time out of the office at meetings with a broad range of people across the University and this morning is a particular treat as I'm meeting Christine Madsen, Head of Digital Programmes in the Bodleian Libraries, about

a potential collaborative funding application. Following our meeting, I get a tour of the recently redeveloped Weston Library (formerly the New Bodleian Library). It's my first visit and I am not disappointed as I walk into the impressive Blackwell Hall, which brilliantly combines the large impressive public and social elements of the hall with a mezzanine balcony on which there is exactly what you want to see in a Bodleian building… books, books and more books! As the tour progresses higher up the building, I catch some breathtaking views of Oxford across to the Radcliffe Camera. This is followed by a look round the Oxford Centre for Digital Scholarship, which is a hub for innovative multidisciplinary research designed to enhance the Libraries' support for research in the University. It's an exciting space, with a great deal of potential, and I hope to spend a lot more time here in the future.

'there is exactly what you want to see in a Bodleian building… books, books and more books!'

Ruth taking advantage of the social space in Blackwell Hall in the new Weston Library

Back in the office I respond to a number of e-mails related to two Digital Humanities funding applications which involve the Oxford e-Research Centre as a key partner. I have been based at the Centre since its start-up in 2006, working across a variety of DH projects as Project Manager and also as a research facilitator, supporting researchers in finding funding opportunities through to submitting their application. Currently I work part time as the Digital Humanities Network Co-ordinator, for which my time is seconded to the Humanities Division, and in this capacity I now spend a bit of time organizing a programme of DH training sessions that we are rolling out to postgraduates and early career researchers. The aims of the sessions are to provide training from the ever popular 'Digital Humanities Summer School' to Oxford graduates and researchers, and to enable humanities scholars to become skilled in applying a particular tool or technique to their work. This term the programme will cover training on crowdsourcing, visualization and project management,

and I spend a few minutes e-mailing potential dates to one of the prospective speakers and thinking about how we advertise the programme effectively to reach our intended audience.

Before the day continues with further meetings, I join a group from the e-Research Centre for an informal DH lunch at the Royal Oak. The pub is one of those genuine Oxford pubs, cosy and welcoming and geographically enticing, being placed right between the Humanities Divisional office in the old Radcliffe Infirmary building and the e-Research Centre on Keble Road. We try to hold a DH lunch semi-regularly, inviting anyone interested in DH at the e-Research Centre, along with colleagues from other departments. On this occasion colleagues from the Bodleian, Humanities Division and IT Services join us for a burger. The ensuing discussion illustrates just how little knowledge (and talent) I have musically, but what incredibly talented individuals I have around me. Members of the FAST project (Fusing Semantic and Audio Technologies for Intelligent Music Production and Consumption) talk of their love of music and I realize that scraping a Grade 1 in piano really doesn't cut it in certain circles!

> 'Grade 1 in piano really doesn't cut it in certain circles!'
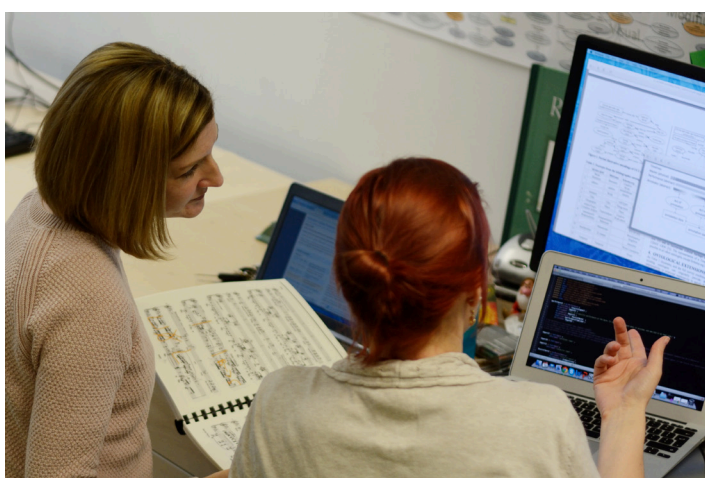
Back in the office, Ruth gets a quick update on the FAST project from Terhi Nurmikko-Fuller

Feeling rather full (and musically challenged), I walk across the road to the Oxford Internet Institute for a meeting with our DH Champion, Kathryn Eccles. Since the DH Network was set up towards the end of 2014, we have been working closely together to realize and prioritize the goals of the Network, including the training provision for postgraduates and early career researchers that I spent some time on earlier. This afternoon we meet to discuss various ideas for the coming term. Fuelled with coffee and chocolate brownies, we pull together a plan and I am back at my desk by 15:00 to answer a number of further e-mails that have arrived while I was out.

Before doing so, I wander along to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. The kitchen is by far the most collaborative room at the e-Research Centre. Computer scientists and supercomputing experts, visualization specialists, social scientists and humanities researchers (to name just a few) all make their way to the kitchen daily to seek a tea or coffee to sustain their research. With such a melting pot of interests, you never know where the conversation might lead. This afternoon, Iain Emsley, a software engineer working in Radio Astronomy, tells me that he has just found out that he's won a prize at a DH Bodleian hackfest. His entry entitled 'If Music be the Food of Love – Sonifying Drama' was in response to the Bodleian's call for students and researchers interested in the intersection between technology, history and literature, and it's this kind of cross-pollination of interests, ideas and disciplines that make Digital Humanities and the e-Research Centre (including the kitchen) really great places to be.

> 'The kitchen is by far the most collaborative room at the e-Research Centre'

For the next 30 minutes, the e-mails are tackled and I spend a bit of time organizing a meeting of a cross-university working group which, under the umbrella of TORCH (The

Research Centre in the Humanities), ensures that DH activities across the University align with the aims of the Digital Humanities Strategy and the University-wide Digital Strategy. The termly meetings are an important opportunity to get interested parties from right across the University to engage, collaborate and think openly about current and future direction.

Finally, I have a brief Skype catch-up with the Director of the e-Research Centre, Professor David de Roure, who is currently at a conference in America. We chat about a project I'm soon to start working on and we sketch out a number of different options for how to take things forward. As soon as our Skype meeting ends, I have to pack up and get myself to the bus stop ready for the journey to collect the kids. This time of day is always a race against time, but once on the bus I try to unwind a little and resist the temptation to check my e-mails (although this has now been made much harder by the introduction of free WiFi on the buses!). Today I stare out of the window and try to draw a line between a busy, productive day at work and the crazy, unpredictable (but wonderful) world of a five- and two-year-old waiting for me at home.

'I try to unwind a little and resist the temptation to check my e-mails'

Ruth Kirkham
Digital Humanities Co-ordinator
The University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
E-mail: ruth.kirkham@oerc.ox.ac.uk

ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8840-0161