Digital History as Trading Zone? Reflections from a Doctoral Training Unit

Tim van der Heijden, University of Luxembourg
tim.vanderheijden@uni.lu

This paper addresses the question how Digital History "trading zones" are being constituted in practice and how they are situated in physical working environments. The analysis is based on a case study of the Doctoral Training Unit (DTU) "Digital History and Hermeneutics", an interdisciplinary research and training programme that was established at the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH) of the University of Luxembourg. The DTU is designed as an interdisciplinary "trading zone", in which thirteen doctoral candidates with different disciplinary backgrounds – from history, linguistics and philosophy to computer and information science – reflect on the epistemological and methodological challenges of doing digital history and humanities research (Fickers 2015, 2012).

The paper reflects on the project's first year, in which the doctoral researchers were introduced to various skills and methods in digital humanities as part of the so-called "DH incubation phase". This phase included trainings in text mining, digital source criticism, database structures, data visualization, GIS analysis, tool criticism and algorithmic critique. The paper presents some of the main practical and epistemological opportunities and challenges of "thinkering": the playful experimentation with digital tools and technologies for doing historical research. It furthermore reflects on the practical and institutional challenges of constituting an interdisciplinary trading zone, like the DTU. As such, it addresses a number of critical questions: How to build bridges between different knowledge domains in a specific research environment? How to stimulate interdisciplinary collaboration and to get scholars out of their disciplinary or methodological comfort zones? What is at stake in such interdisciplinary trading zones? Who are the traders – and what is being traded?

The analysis is informed by studies on interdisciplinarity (Klein 2015, Deegan and McCarty 2012, Stehr and Weingart 2000), trading zones (Collins et al. 2007, Galison 1996, Kemman 2019) and communities of practice (Wenger 1998). Empirically, it draws on a series of semi-structured interviews and thirty-nine self-reflexive training reports, in which the doctoral researchers of the DTU discuss their experiences of doing digital history and hermeneutics in an interdisciplinary setting. Finally, the paper evaluates the suitability of the trading zone concept as analytical framework for studying interdisciplinary collaborations in Digital History as a field.

References

Collins, H., Evans, R. and Gorman, M. "Trading Zones and Interactional Expertise", *Studies in History and Philosophy Part A*, 38 (2007): 657–666. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2007.09.003

Deegan, M. and McCarty, W. *Collaborative Research in the Digital Humanities*. Ashgate Pub., Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT (2012).

Fickers, A. "Towards a New Digital Historicism? Doing History in the Age of Abundance", *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture*, 1.1 (2012): 19–26. http://ojs.viewjournal.eu/index.php/view/article/view/jethc004

Fickers, A. "FNR PRIDE Application Doctoral Training Unit Research and Training Program: 'DTU Digital History and Hermeneutics'", University of Luxembourg (2015).

Galison, P. "Computer Simulations and the Trading Zone." In P. Galison and D. J. Stump (eds) *The Disunity of Science: Boundaries, Contexts, and Power*. Stanford University Press, Stanford (1996): 118–157.

Kemman, M. *Trading Zones of Digital History*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Luxembourg (2019).

Klein, J. T. *Interdisciplining Digital Humanities: Boundary Work in an Emerging Field*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor (2015).

Stehr, N. and Weingart, P. (eds). *Practising Interdisciplinarity*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto (2000).

Wenger, E. *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1998).