

Heritage in the Age of Digital Humanities : How should training practices evolve?

French National Archives (Pierrefitte, near Paris)

Deadline: Mar 2, 2012

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Training in heritage issues has always been closely dependent on how heritage itself is defined. After the French Revolution, museums were regarded as contributing to public education and developing notions of citizenship, so when the École du Louvre opened in 1882 it was given the responsibility of training “curators, missionaries and archeologists”. The purpose of promoting national history lay behind the creation of The École des Chartes in 1821 and the French Board of Inspectors of Historic Monuments in 1830. After natural heritage became a matter of interest in 1906, the French National Horticultural School opened in 1945 (it was replaced in 1976 by the National School for Landscaping at Versailles in 1976). The National Heritage Institute, which opened in 1990, and the French National School for Information Technology and Libraries, 1992, both testify to changes in training programs, in response to evolutions in the field of heritage that made it necessary for future curators to acquire new technical and managerial skills. Teaching programs have also had to come to terms with evolving notions of heritage, as recorded in a series of UNESCO conventions – from the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972 to the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 and the Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage the same year.

The effects of digital technology on the social organization of information are now sufficiently recognized to enable analysis of their implications for professional skills and practices and to encourage investigations into the ensuing changes in relations between heritage institutions (museums, archives, libraries, heritage sites) and the public.

Two issues at least are at stake here. The first is the digitalization of heritage and its effects. The second is the very definition of digital heritage. They are of interest to heritage institutions and higher education and research alike.

New practices are being put into place. These relate to the skills involved in the field of documentation, to how digital documents are published and communicated to the public, and to how digital data and documentation are exploited, preserved and conserved within the institutions themselves. However, the effect, both on long-standing institutional responsibilities and on the changing environment of training programs in heritage issues, has not yet been properly thought through. In this context, there is an urgent need to consider how far the norms, instruments and

practices governing the creation and management of digital documents by institutions are open to evolving practices in the public environment of the World Wide Web. Furthermore, it is important to take into account the fact that digital documentation is also playing a major role in changes in practice currently being implemented in universities and research institutes.

Our conference proposes to consider both the new issues facing training programs in the heritage industries and the transformations taking place on a wider scale in university and research cultures. Digital humanities suggest a new approach for studying the relations between the way heritage is defined and the manner in which digital resources circulate and are appropriated, and how they are absorbed into society.

Four conference streams are planned to tackle these issues.

Stream n° 1: Investigating the epistemology of the concept of heritage in the 21st century.

What are the criteria according to which “digital heritage” can be established as a new category? Is it just a matter of identifying documents, whether digitally-born or converted into digital formats, that lay claim to the attention both of heritage institutions and their conservation policies, and of social groups and communities? To consider heritage in this way is to view it as the result of legitimating processes. However, this involves setting aside what might be described as the open dynamics involved in the making and transformation of heritage – something that digital media bring to the forefront, to the extent that they blur the distinctions between an object, its documentation and its distribution. The concept of digital heritage has a heuristic value insofar as it brings together heritage theory and the question of reproduction. The culture of digital networks makes it necessary to rethink Benjamin’s categories.

What will be the impact of these issues on training programs? How does the notion of digital heritage challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries, both from an institutional point of view and with regard to the production of knowledge? What effect will digital heritage have on professional training and doctoral programs? Should technology be approached in terms of new skills or should it be recognized as instituting a digital culture?

Stream n°2: The production, distribution and appropriation of digital resources.

The digitalization of heritage is motivated by considerations of public interest, involving the conservation (documentation and preservation) of source objects and the organization of resources targeting the public. However, the criteria governing what is to be digitalized are much less clear.

Compliance of data and documents with accessibility and interoperability standards (metadata, encoding, etc.), as required by developments in digital environments, is improving. However, issues regarding the use and appropriation of the various levels of documentation produced by archives, libraries and museums give rise to conflicting interpretations.

Digital publication in any medium involves questions of data structuring, the use of documentary languages and the design of user interfaces. The push to put entire collections on-line ensures that documentary resources have a major role to play in the way documentation is exploited, especially in an academic context. What is to be done with the increasing glut of documentation? What interfaces are required – and for what professional uses? Furthermore, current developments in connection with Web 2.0 are redefining relations between institutions and their audiences and destabilizing the core expert practices of heritage institutions. What room is there for new indexing practices (folksonomies)?

Stream n° 3: Heritage institutions, teaching and research: inventing new forms of digital publication.

New forms of digital publication are emerging. Different way to access specific documentary corporuses are being tested, in response to a variety of research requirements, including the treatment of large masses of data and documents, visualization, knowledge presentation, timelines and dynamical spatialization. The means of accessing and publishing documents are being constantly renewed and complexified. Research practices in heritage institutions and higher education are being brought up to date, assuming new forms and provoking changes in the ways researchers and experts collaborate. Heritage institutions have a knowledge-producing function, which has led a number of them to engage in the production of digital materials from their own resources but also from pooled documentary resources. They facilitate the exploitation of a given corpus, in response to requests from research teams. Such agreements go beyond putting digital sources at the disposal of interested parties. They imply partnerships between heritage institutions and research communities.

How can these new forms of cooperation between curators, archivists and librarians, engineers, technicians, researchers in the humanities and social sciences, be conceptualized, given that they involve institutions and professional bodies, as well as individuals with different skills and cultures? The development of new publishing strategies requires space for experimentation. It needs openness to new ideas. How will institutions make room for all this? How are training programs in heritage-related professions and doctoral programs in human and social sciences responding to these new perspectives?

Stream n° 4: New economic and legal models.

Digitalization is creating new working conditions in heritage professions. The structure of digital projects involves a variety of professional bodies. However, no clear norms exist. What benchmarks could be used as guidelines for setting up cultural projects in digital environments? The Europeana project gives an insight into the changes in working conditions currently underway, and into their legal implications, especially with regard to intellectual property. Digitalization also requires new financial resources. New models are emerging. These involve both new forms of public investment and public-private initiatives, in which the responsibilities of the public sector must be safeguarded. How do the issues raised by Open Data impinge on digital heritage? Heritage institutions are by definition knowledge-producing institutions. Have they not also become a service industry within the economy of the Web, existing alongside search engines but also in competition with them?

The conference welcomes submissions from professionals working in heritage institutions or the heritage service sector, as well as from academics involved in heritage programs and scholars in the humanities and social sciences with an interest in digital culture.

Deadlines and practical information:

- March 2, 2012: deadline for submissions of not more than 1000 words (+ bibliography). These should be sent to bernadette.dufrene@orange.fr and should include a cover page containing the following information: name, title, professional function and institution of author and/or contributors; postal and e-mail address, phone and fax numbers;
- March 30, 2012: communication of the program committee's decisions;
- June 1, 2012: deadline for submitting completed papers. It is planned to publish conference

papers.

Program committee:

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Reference:

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