

N8 Digital North workshop, 19 September 2013, University of Sheffield

The second of the four workshops in the 'New Thinking from the North' N8 partnership project took place at the University of Sheffield's Humanities Research Institute on 19 September 2013. The initiative aims to identify the ways in which academics and practitioners in arts and humanities can collaborate with local authorities and communities to help drive economic growth in the North

The Sheffield workshop focussed on the digital and the aim of this workshop was to explore the rich and varied contexts within which arts and humanities subjects can make meaningful collaborations with the digital. Andrew Linn, Professor of the History of Linguistics and the Faculty of Arts and Humanities' Director of Research and Innovation opened proceedings by talking through some of the digital context for work in Sheffield, including the work of the Humanities Research Institute's digital team. He was followed by Dinah Birch, Professor of English Literature and Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research and Knowledge Exchange) at the University of Liverpool, who gave a brief introduction to the N8 Research Partnership, focused on the aims of the Arts and Humanities strand of this project.

Our keynote provocation was provided by Gregory Sporton, Professor of Digital Culture and Creativity at the University of Greenwich. His entertaining presentation focused on some of the issues that are faced in the convergence between the digital arts, creative industries and the digital humanities. His views on PowerPoint and Twitter were commented on throughout the day and caused much debate about the value of these kinds of tools in conveying information. He also highlighted the importance of 'wetware' – the human element in the technological process and also the issues of different disciplines having different methods of working. A thrown together device by him and a research partner to trace the movement of dancers has found life in a training aid for nurses learning about manual handling, something which was not in mind at its conception, but which developed as people saw the potential for a reasonably abstract digital idea.



Fig 1. Professor Gregory Sporton talking about his movement tracing device.

A varied panel, chaired by Michael Pidd, Manager of HRI Digital in Sheffield, of academics and creative practitioners responded to Professor Sporton's provocation. Their responses varied, as might have been expected. Michael Pidd focused on the digital as a replicator of historical experience that is missing from research such as that in archaeology. Bob Shoemaker, Professor of Eighteenth Century History at Sheffield, picked up on this point and spoke of the value of visualisation in making sense of research data sets. He also focused on the importance of the digital in encouraging 'ground-up' history. Bob Pinfold, Creative Director of Mickey and Mallory, a design agency based in Manchester, made the point that for creative industries, the parameters are usually different to those in Universities. For creative SME's the business case is important, as is success as commercial industries cannot afford to fail. He also highlighted an issue of collaboration within larger organisations where creative and technical staff may not work closely together. Paul Coulton, Senior Lecturer with Imagination Lancaster, a design-led research lab at Lancaster University, made the point that games are not a universal panacea 'sprinkling fun on boring things' and that they should not be treated as such. Gaming technologies have their place, but in inexperienced hands, can be an inappropriate afterthought, rather than integral to projects. They also have a relatively short shelf life as developments are rapid, leading to heightened audience expectation, which research projects cannot always deliver.



Laura Robertson, Co-Editor of *The Double Negative*, an online arts magazine based in Liverpool, provided a point of view mindful of artists and their need. She considered technology, in particular social media, vital to create and strengthen networks and something that *The Double Negative* relied on heavily both in a local sense and to try and foster a global network.

Questions from the floor stimulated a lively discussion with topics including the sustaining and archiving of digital creative practice, which led to a call for the development of an online repair and recycle culture (Coulton) and to build, revise and update older projects (Shoemaker) and the question of Open Data and what this development, and that of a focus on 'big data' from research funders means for Arts and Humanities Research.

Fig 2 Laura Robertson responds to the provocation

In the afternoon, academics had been invited to 'pitch' an idea for an N8 collaboration. Two sessions, of three pitches each were punctuated by group discussions by delegates around the themes proposed.

Karen Harvey (Sheffield) pitched *Rebellious North* an idea that had come out of the first workshop and Durham's plans to celebrate the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta. Her proposal centred on the idea for a series of eight linked research and public engagement programmes in the N8 area, each one centring on one significant historic Northern 'rebellion'. By doing this, it would enable a scrutiny of 'the North' and 'rebellion' drawing upon arts and humanities research with a view to both examine and promote political engagement.

Adrian Moore spoke about his work on *Computers and Music* and the potential for collaboration amongst the unique environment of northern universities. Building on a successful conference held last year, Moore suggested that

In the final pitch of the first section, Simeon Yates (Institute of Cultural Capital) pitched Digital Inclusion as a theme which could be explored by an N8 collaboration. He alerted us to the fact that a 'digital by default' society, mainly driven by cost, excludes the 20% of households who are deemed to be 'offline'. Arts and Humanities can contribute to this agenda by supporting the understanding of digital inequalities and by research that seeks to equalise access.



Fig 3: from left, Karen Harvey, Adrian Moore and Simeon Yates make their collaboration pitches

The second session heard pitches from Jacky Waldock and Marion Leonard (Liverpool's Institute of Popular Music, Cathy Shrank and Susan Fitzmaurice (School of English, Sheffield) and Claire Taylor (Hispanic Studies, Liverpool)



Fig 4: from left, Marion Leonard, Jacky Waldock, Cathy Shrank, Susan Fitzmaurice and Claire Taylor in action.

Waldock and Leonard proposed a linking of existing digitised music collections across the North, to include both public and institutional collections and talked, amongst other things, about the importance of community based activist archivist in thinking about music collections, technologies and democratising properties.

Shrank and Fitzmaurice pitched a theme around Tracing and Understanding Keywords, part of a project they are already involved in, but one that could work well across the N8 universities. By looking at the meanings of keywords in a given context, we are able to delve beyond frequency as a measure of value.

Lastly, Claire Taylor presented on Global Cultures. Some of her pitch resonated with that of Simeon Yates, in that digital exclusion and lack of access to equipment can be a deciding factor in engagement in the Latin American countries of her research. In contrast though, these countries (and others around the world) have more emphasis on low tech solutions, which are more easily accessible. This could provide the N8 with a comparative focus.



Small group discussions involving delegates took place at the end of each session around the three themes presented. These were presented at a final plenary session. Ideas discussed included the potential for combining the Rebellious North theme with Tracing and Understanding Keywords to explore links between keywords and space. By plotting dialect and concentrations of usages in texts, visual representation of frequencies could be mapped on to the landscape which would enhance understanding of this theme. Rebellious North provoked discussion, amongst other things, about the nature of rebellion and the geographical boundaries of 'the north' as well as the methods or epistemologies that might provide a focus for this theme.



Fig 5: Small group discussions of potential collaboration topics.

The Musical North and Computers and Music raised issues of copyright, disappearing items and discussion of audiences, along with the idea of ghost venues and music ecologies, economies and memories. Global Cultures and Digital Inclusion found that there was much synergy between these two themes and the potential for N8 work around comparative digital inclusion, comparative digital youth culture, languages and the internet and investigation into localised, useable, scaleable technology.

What was also clear out of these discussions was the level of enthusiasm and ideas that had been generated by the different pitches and that the impetus is there from the N8 Universities to pursue some of these themes beyond *New Thinking From the North*.

Storify of tweets from the day at <http://sfy.co/sFST>

News report from the day at <http://www.n8research.org.uk/news/2013/9/digital-innovators-discuss-new-research-partnerships>

The N8 Research Partnership is a consortium of the Universities of Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and York

www.n8research.org.uk



Appendix 1 – The programme

Digital North, 19 September 2013
University of Sheffield Humanities Research Institute.
10am-4pm

Programme

Morning session

	Session	Speaker/s
9.30	Arrival and coffee	
10.00	Intro and welcome. The digital context in Sheffield	Andrew Linn , <i>Director of Research and Innovation, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Sheffield</i>
10.15	The N8 context – why are we here?	Dinah Birch , <i>Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Knowledge Exchange), University of Liverpool</i>
10.30	Keynote provocation: Issues, strategies, methods of convergence and collaboration between digital arts, creative industries and the digital humanities	Gregory Sporton , <i>Professor of Digital Culture and Creativity, University of Greenwich</i>
11.15	Panel responses – a mixed panel of academics and creative practitioners will respond to the initial provocation from their point of view.	Bob Shoemaker , <i>Professor of Eighteenth Century History and Co-Director of Old Bailey Online, University of Sheffield</i> Paul Coulton , <i>Imagination, University of Lancaster</i> Michael Pidd , <i>HRI Digital Manager, University of Sheffield</i> Bob Pinfold , <i>Mickey and Mallory Ltd, Manchester</i> Laura Robertson , <i>Double Negative, Liverpool</i>
11.45	Group discussion based on above	All (Chair: Mike Pidd)
12.30-13.15	Lunch	

Afternoon session

13.15	<p>Session 1 – Ideas for collaboration:</p> <p>A series of cases for themes that have the potential to be collaborative between N8 universities and digital and creative practitioners.</p>	
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	<p>Themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebellious North • Computers and Music • Digital Inclusion 	<p>Karen Harvey, Dept. of History, University of Sheffield Adrian Moore, Dept. of Music, University of Sheffield Simeon Yates, Director, Institute of Cultural Capital, Liverpool John Moores University/University of Liverpool</p>
13.45	<p>Small group discussions, based on the above three themes.</p> <p>Initial Questions: What might a collaboration based on one of the above themes look like? How might it be funded? What could the outcomes be? Who might the partners be? (in addition to Universities, broad sectors, if not specific organisations)</p>	
14.15	<p>Session 2 – Ideas for collaboration</p> <p>Themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digitising Music collections • Tracing and understanding key words • World Cultures 	<p>Marion Leonard and Jacky Waldock, Institute of Popular Music, University of Liverpool Cathy Shrank and Susan Fitzmaurice, School of English, University of Sheffield Claire Taylor, Department of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies, University of Liverpool</p>
14.45	<p>Small group discussions based on the above themes and questions</p>	
15.15	Coffee	
15.30	<p>What themes are emerging about collaboration?</p> <p>Short feedback from each group and chance to group themes and think about next steps.</p>	<p>Facilitated by Amy Ryall, External Engagement Projects Office, University of Sheffield</p>
16.00	Close	

Appendix 2 – Speaker Biographies

Andrew Linn

Andrew Linn is Professor of the History of Linguistics and Director of Research in the Arts and Humanities at the University of Sheffield. He has published books and articles on language planning and language standardisation as well as the history of language study. His two principal current projects are a Leverhulme-funded study of the changing role of English in Europe and an AHRC-funded project using virtual worlds technology to investigate migration from Europe to the USA in the 19th century.

Dinah Birch

Professor Dinah Birch is Professor of English Literature and Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Exchange at the University of Liverpool. Her role involves overseeing all matters relating to the development of the university's research and knowledge exchange ambitions and policies, both internally and externally. She represents the university's research interests within the Russell Group and N8. She also chairs the REF sub-panel 29 (English Literature and Language) and is Deputy Chair of Main Panel M. Dinah currently chairs the Civic Engagement Action Group.

Dinah has published widely on Victorian fiction and poetry, and on the work of the critic John Ruskin. Her books include *Our Victorian Education* (2007), and she is the general editor of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (7th ed., 2009). She has recently published new editions of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (2011) and Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* (2012) with Oxford University Press, and served as a member of the Man Booker prize panel in 2012.

Gregory Sporton

Founding Director of the Visualisation Research Unit in the School of Art at Birmingham City University from 2005-2012, Gregory Sporton is now Professor of Digital Culture and Creativity at the University of Greenwich. He has a background as a performer and teacher of dance and in his latest role is focused on developing interdisciplinary research in creative arts practice and computing. More details about his research interests can be found at <https://drg.backpackit.com/pub/907068>

Bob Shoemaker

Bob Shoemaker is Professor of Eighteenth-Century British History at the University of Sheffield and Director of Research-designate for the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. He is co-director of the Old Bailey Online and several successor projects, including the recently funded AHRC Digital Transformations Large Theme project, 'The Digital Panopticon: the Global Impact of London Punishment, 1780-1925'

Michael Pidd

Michael Pidd is the HRI Digital Manager at the University of Sheffield's Humanities Research Institute, one of the UK's leading centres for research and development in the digital humanities (<http://hridigital.shef.ac.uk>). The HRI's expertise includes digital editions and archives, text analysis, data mining, knowledge modelling, natural language processing, linked data, 2D and 3D visualisations, virtual worlds and mobile web applications. Michael has 20 years experience developing and managing projects in the digital humanities. He currently oversees 16 active research projects as well as being Co-I on the ESRC-funded project Intoxicants in Early Modernity.

Bob Pinfold

Bob Pinfold is the Creative Director at Mickey & Mallory with 20 years' design and digital industry experience. He has an extensive skill set covering creative direction, information architecture and information design, brand development, art direction and graphic design for advertising, web, print, kiosks and video. He is an advocate of user-centred and accessible design and makes sure that all projects are subject to this creative methodology. Bob has experience of working for public, private and third sector clients including the Department of Health, NHS, JISC, British Library, University of London, University of Manchester, University of Sheffield, London School of Economics, University of Cambridge, Intel, Cisco, Virgin, Amnesty International, Oxfam and the World Wildlife Fund.

Laura Robertson

Laura Robertson is editor and co-founder of online arts magazine The Double Negative, specialising in artist features, interviews, critical analysis and life across the cultural spectrum. Established in Liverpool December 2011 as a reaction to the lack of platforms for critical arts writing in the city, it now engages arts professionals and art-lovers from around the globe.



Karen Harvey

Karen Harvey is Reader in Cultural History at the University of Sheffield. An historian of eighteenth-century Britain with expertise in gender, sexuality and material culture, her books include *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Bodies and Gender in English Erotic Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) and *The Little Republic: Masculinity and Domestic Authority in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

Adrian Moore

Adrian Moore is a composer of electroacoustic music. He mainly composes music for fixed formats (CD, DVD), music intended for 'sound diffusion' over multiple loudspeaker systems. He also writes for instruments, often with a live processing element using Max-MSP and custom built software. He directs the University of Sheffield Sound Studios (USSS) where researchers and composers collaborate on new musical projects. Adrian Moore's research interests are focussed towards the development of the acousmatic tradition in electroacoustic music, the performance of electroacoustic music, signal processing and human-computer interaction in music. His music has been commissioned by the Groupe de Bourges (IMEB) and Arts Council England. A significant proportion of his music is available on 3 discs: *Traces*, *Rêve de l'aube* and *Contrechamps* on the Empreintes DIGITALes label www.electrocd.com

Simeon Yates

Professor Simeon Yates is currently the Director of the Institute of Cultural Capital in Liverpool. He was previously the Director of the Cultural, Communication and Computing Research Institute (C3RI) at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK. His research focus is on the social, political and cultural impacts of digital media. This includes a long standing focus on digital media and interpersonal interaction and more recently projects that address issues of digital exclusion. His work has covered analyses of gender differences in CMC, gender and computer gaming, e-mail and letter writing, science in the mass media and text books on social research methods - in particular linguistic and discourse analytic methods.

Marion Leonard

Marion Leonard is a senior lecturer in the School of Music at the University of Liverpool with responsibility for the departmental music collections. Her research focuses on popular music, engaging with issues related to gender, the music industries, heritage and museum practice.

Jacky Waldock

Jacky Waldock has recently completed a PhD in the School of Music at the University of Liverpool. Her AHRC funded research investigates how urban and domestic sound environments can become important to peoples' sense of place, particularly within geographical areas of Liverpool that have been prone to urban change

Cathy Shrank

Cathy Shrank is Professor of Tudor and Renaissance Literature at the University of Sheffield, with a special interest in non-canonical writing and intersections between literature and politics.

Susan Fitzmaurice

Susan Fitzmaurice is Professor and Chair in English Language, School of English, University of Sheffield

Claire Taylor

Reader in Hispanic Studies, Department of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies, University of Liverpool

A specialist in Latin American culture, Claire's research topics include women's writing in Latin America, and Latin(o) American digital culture. Her work focuses on the varied literary and cultural genres being developed online by Latin(o) Americans, with a particular interest in hypertext novels, e-poetry and net art. She has published numerous articles and book chapters on these topics, and is the co-author of the recent volume *Latin American Identity in Online Cultural Production* (New York: Routledge, 2012), and author of the forthcoming *Place and Politics in Latin America Digital Culture: Location and Latin American Net Art* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2014).

