

CHAPTER 11

The Collaborative Project Management Model: Akkasah, an Arab Photography Project

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Establishing a support structure for digital scholarship services in academic libraries is becoming increasingly common. According to an Association of Research Libraries (ARL) survey of its 124 member libraries in January 2016, of the 59% of respondents, all reported that the libraries supported the 19 digital scholarship activities outlined by ARL in the survey, “to one degree or another” [1]. The highest percentage were involved with “making digital collections, creating metadata, and offering data curation and management support (90%–95%), creating exhibits and project planning (85%), GIS and digital mapping (81%), digitization (79%), digital publishing (76%), and even project management (72%)” [1]. Clearly, the work that we think of as supporting “digital scholarship” is alive and well in academic libraries, regardless of whether or not there is a physical center associated with it.

It is important to recognize that ARL’s outline of digital scholarship activities in this survey is much broader than some digital humanists might be comfortable with. It is also difficult to pin down an exact definition of what we now call digital humanities (DH) in order to frame ARL’s digital scholarship activities within them,¹ and indeed, some DH scholars argue that the term is itself pointless in this era of “all things digital” as the new norm.

Or even more far-reaching, is the term digital humanities a redundancy? That is, are the humanities, like all contemporary scientific research and

¹ The author acknowledges that she is using digital humanities and digital scholarship interchangeably, with digital scholarship encompassing all disciplines, not only the humanities.

teaching, already digital to all important extents and purposes? Or – an even more vexed question for professional humanists – has the arrival of the digital forever changed the way humanists work, in the way they gather data and evidence or even in the very questions that humanists and the humanistic disciplines are now capable of posing? Is technology determinative? What role does the solitary scholar – the centuries-old model of the humanist since Petrarch – have in a digital environment that is increasingly collaborative, data-driven, report-oriented, ephemeral, “social” and unmediated? [2].

The New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) Library is no exception to this burgeoning interest in bringing DH work into the research library. Its own Center for Digital Scholarship (CDS) opened in 2014 after the university moved to its newly-built campus, a transition that allowed for a physical space dedicated to fostering digital scholarship initiatives. When the CDS opened, along with the rest of the University and Library, it was after years of planning, numerous conversations with faculty stakeholders, and many hours spent surveying the current landscape for DH center/academic library models. Unlike universities in North America and Europe, establishing DH centers has not taken root as widely in this region. The American University in Beirut held the first regional DH event in 2015, and then again in 2017. NYUAD followed suit, with its Digital Humanities Abu Dhabi conference in 2017. This is still very much a field in its infancy regionally, so while we had plenty of models to look at in North America and Europe, we did not have much to help us shape our vision locally.

Even though the library leadership and the head of the CDS felt they had done their homework leading up to the launch of the space, there was (and still continues to be) an element of not knowing exactly how a new CDS would be received on campus, or how scholars would expect to use it. We found ourselves asking “What should a DH center look like in Abu Dhabi?,” and “What would make you get out of your office and walk across campus to visit a center like ours?.” What does it make sense for the academic library of today to provide for our campus community as it relates to 21st century research? Ultimately, we found ourselves returning to an academic library’s core values of preservation, access, and discovery, but interpreted for a modern, international research community.

11.1 PLANNING THE CENTER FOR DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP

Our environmental scan and conversations with faculty about their own specialized research needs eventually helped give us a template to launch the space with. However, we found that faculty themselves were not very clear on what exactly it was they wanted. Ultimately, a few themes emerged: data services support; networked storage space for faculty projects under development and research data; specialized printing and digitization equipment; instructional design assistance; help with video creation and editing; a high degree of software support and know-how across a spectrum of packages; and help with web publishing projects.

We were also fortunate in that we could look to our colleagues at Bobst Library in New York to get a sense of where they were heading with DH support. At the time, they were figuring out how to respond to what they call the “faculty website problem” [3], and eventually were able to establish a Digital Scholarship Services unit within the library that provides a tiered services structure that draws on resources throughout the library and NYU as a whole. Like other DH/DS units, our own model for the CDS has become a space that pulls together staff and resources from other areas. For initial staff and services, we decided to locate the Data Services Librarian and the Audio and Visual Media Specialist in the CDS. Since academic technology sits within the library at NYUAD, the university’s enterprise technology tools, including the learning management system, our institutional web publishing platform (WordPress), and our streaming media service are all supported out of the CDS, the logic being that these are applications that faculty would require help in using, and we were hoping to draw faculty into the CDS. At the time, the CDS was being cast more as a center for helping faculty with educational technology tools, rather than a space dedicated to longer-term research interests. We had to start somewhere, and moving staff and services that already existed made sense. These also aligned with some of what we heard from faculty about their own expectations for the CDS, though we were not able to promise them everything on their wish lists.

The physical space now contains workstations that include more specialized equipment than would be found elsewhere on campus,

including large format, high-resolution flatbed scanners, film negative scanners, a microfilm/fiche reader, equipment to digitize VHS and cassette tapes, powerful hard drives for editing video and working on projects that require more advanced computing needs, and dual screen PCs for data services work. As the Coalition for Networked Information explains, “A major advantage of housing a center in the library is that it provides a mechanism for the democratization of expensive technologies and a means to experiment with new forms of scholarship without making a personal or departmental monetary investment” [4]. This was the driving logic in our decision to move this type of equipment into the CDS.

In considering our approaches to fielding research project requests, we eventually recognized that, unlike our colleagues at Bobst Library in New York and at other larger research institutions, who are responsible for supporting the needs of thousands of students and faculty, and thus have to provide services on an enterprise level, as a smaller institution with only a few hundred faculty and a student body that will eventually only reach around 2600 students [5], we do not have to always be concerned with issues of scalability. This was a mindset that we had to let go of in our planning process; the idea that we should only provide a standard set of tools and services, when in fact, agility is just as important a feature for a space like the CDS. We are fortunate in that we can approach each project with individual needs in mind. It is obviously helpful to be able to draw upon previous practices and established technologies, so that you are not reinventing the wheel each time, but the ability to pivot and address unique project needs has proven very beneficial to us and to our faculty, who recognize that we will try to work with their specific requirements in mind. This has become an important aspect of the mission of the CDS.

11.2 LAUNCHING AKKASAH: CENTER FOR PHOTOGRAPHY AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY ABU DHABI

During our planning period for the new unit, library leadership also made a conscious decision to physically move a faculty project that was being developed in collaboration with the library into the new CDS space. Akkasah, Center for Photography at NYU Abu Dhabi, was established in

2013 in partnership with the NYUAD Library. Conceived by a standing associate professor in literature and visual studies, Shamooun Zamir, its mission is to document and preserve the region's rich history in photography, and to enable new scholarship in this field. While there are certainly venues for exploring photography in the Arab world, to our knowledge, very little is being done to archive and preserve this valuable heritage in perpetuity, with Beirut's Arab Image Foundation being a notable exception. This void in local representation provided the perfect opportunity for NYU Abu Dhabi to dedicate resources to funding a project like Akkasah, while unintentionally providing a replicable model for digital scholarship projects within the library.

"Akkasah," which originates from the Khaliiji term for "camera," and whose root term of *Aks*, means "reflection," is a multifaceted faculty/library partnership that brings together staff, resources, expertise, space, and technologies to produce a center for photography. Akkasah "explores the histories and contemporary practices of photography in the Arab world from comparative perspectives: it fosters the scholarly study of these histories and practices in dialogue with other photographic cultures and traditions from around the world. Through a range of activities, the center also supports the developing photographic culture in the UAE" [6].

This center includes a physical and digital archive of photos established in conjunction with the library, conferences, and colloquia in this subject area, a growing collection of photobooks that are a permanent part of the library collection, and a planned future book series around the study of Arab photography. This library/faculty partnership is truly integrated in its approach to developing a comprehensive resource for the study of photography in the Arab world. The project operates with a full-time staff of three, including the project manager, and rotating intern positions, all overseen by the faculty sponsor, director, and principal investigator. The photos are acquired in various ways from around the region, including trips to acquire collections from families who are willing to donate. Project staff routinely comes back from trips abroad with suitcases full of material to add to the archive. Priorities for the digitization of items goes to the collections whose originals will be returned to the owners, with the process of scanning and describing the collection using metadata taking place in the Akkasah space within the CDS.

During the initial planning phase for Akkasah, the driving model was focused on photography from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), including family photos of local Emiratis. The original project title was “Histories of the UAE: A Photographic Archive,” however, it soon became clear that documenting the everyday lives of Emiratis might prove challenging due to cultural sensitivities. While NYU Abu Dhabi’s physical location provides an ideal opportunity for developing a collection in and of the region, there are cultural considerations that those not well-versed in the traditions of the UAE and Muslim culture might not recognize. For example, one of the focuses of Akkasah is to capture everyday life, including street scenes, family moments, children playing, and essentially people going about their normal daily routines. The project’s original premise was to offer a glimpse into this culture, and share it with the world. However, Emiratis are traditionally very private. Sharing these family photos is far from the norm, and is rarely done. Showing a photo of a woman’s face in such a public way in this conservative culture is taboo. Ask for important family photos, and you are more likely to get a picture of a family member with a member of the royal family than you are one of the family sitting around celebrating the Eid holiday together. These are not viewed as being worth noting, or all that important. Additionally, other issues of privacy have also come up recently, when Akkasah was able to acquire a large collection from a local family in Dubai. Some of these are on 8 mm film that must be handled by qualified preservation teams based in the United States, and the agreement made with the local family is that they can only be handled and viewed by female preservationists, out of respect for the women in the family. This is an excellent example of how Akkasah and the library have to remain open-minded and flexible when handling collections, and remain willing to adapt a standard approach out of respect for the local culture.

The UAE is also a very young state, in the sense that documenting its heritage has only come to the forefront of attention in very recent years. This is a country, only 46 years old, i.e., motivated by development, and is trying to quickly catch up to the rest of the world. Preserving the past through its cultural heritage has often been pushed to the side in favor of growth and progress. Thus, the initial idea for Akkasah in documenting the “histories of the UAE” has been expanded to documenting the photography of the Arab world (Fig. 11.1).



Figure 11.1 Sultan Ahmed Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey, street seller in the snow (circa 1930, Istanbul, Turkey). Engin Ozendes. *Source: Courtesy of Akkasah: Center for Photography at NYU Abu Dhabi.*

11.3 ESTABLISHING OUR “AKKASAH MODEL”

Akkasah has proven itself to be a symbiotic relationship for both the library, a natural partner for archival efforts, and for the project itself, which can draw on the library’s established resources and workflows. This integrated approach has existed since the original vision for a center focused on Arab photography was first conceived by its faculty sponsor. While the faculty member brought the original idea for an Arab center for photography to the library, it was up to the library director to help guide this vision, and to explain how the library could be an integral partner. What could the library provide that would foster this project in the long run, and what would it make sense for us to contribute? Where would it make sense that the project exist on its own? Ultimately, the contributions from the library are the obvious ones that are already part of what libraries do best: consult on preservation standards; provide perpetual archival storage; provide access to, and managed storage of, the physical photographs via our Archives and Special Collections department; consult on digitizing analog photos to archival standards;

describe them using international metadata standards; make them discoverable via finding aids, so that they can be accessed and used by scholars to create new research in the field of photography in the Arab world.

This partnership between the library, the faculty sponsor, and Akkasah has been tightly knit since the beginning. Before the project was funded and a physical center was launched, the library director worked alongside the faculty sponsor to develop a funding proposal, even going so far as to calculate the average time and cost it would take to digitize a physical photo and describe it using encoded archival description-compliant software, in order to help come up with budget estimates and a complete scope of work for the faculty's funding request. We liaised with the preservation department at NYU Libraries in New York, widely recognized as a leader in archival preservation, to confirm that they could accept the deposits of the scanned photographs into their storage system, and also ensured that their specifications, based on international archival standards, would be communicated to the project team once launched. We used the overarching principles of access, preservation, and quality control, benchmarks of librarianship, to ensure that this project would be discoverable and accessible to scholars worldwide for years to come.

This partnership continued once the project was funded by the university, and the faculty sponsor was able to advance it beyond the proposal stage. The head of the yet-to-be-opened CDS sat on the search committee for hiring a project manager for Akkasah. After the CDS opened in its new space and Akkasah physically moved in, CDS staff also served as liaisons to the Digital Library and Technology Services (DLTS) division at NYU Libraries in New York, connecting the project manager in Abu Dhabi with the appropriate people in New York who could guide them on scanning the images to archival standards, including best practices in calibrating their scanners, so that the digital images met the high standards of NYU Libraries preservation department. There were several late night video conferences as the Akkasah team connected with those in New York to be walked through proper equipment configuration. The university archivist was brought over from New York to Abu Dhabi for a week, to train the project manager on Archivists' Toolkit, the software that is used to organize and describe the collection with proper metadata. The first collection of photos, the Yasser Alwan collection, was acquired from Egypt, digitized and archived via the

library's preservation systems, and made available online in 2014. The physical photographs are housed in the library's Archives and Special Collections unit (Fig. 11.2).

The relationship between the library and Akkasah has evolved, now that the project is beyond its initial launch phase and firmly established at the university and within the NYUAD Library. The project manager is well-versed on digitizing and describing the photos, and working with the required equipment and software, so much so that she now trains



Figure 11.2 A man showing his empty pockets (1920, Cairo, Egypt). Yasser Alwan Collection. *Source: Courtesy of Akkasah: Center for Photography at NYU Abu Dhabi.*

CDS research assistants in creating finding aids for non-Akkasah collections, furthering this symbiotic Akkasah/library relationship. She has ongoing relationships with the preservation department in New York, so CDS staff are more hands-off, though this does not mean that Akkasah exists on its own. Part of its budget still contributes to the acquisition of photobooks that become part of the library's permanent collection. The physical photographs that Akkasah acquires are still, and will continue to be, stored in the library's Archives and Special Collections department, so that they can be kept in a secure, climate-controlled environment. Physically, Akkasah sits in the CDS, with an office for the project manager and two workstations for the archival assistants. The staff of CDS and other library staff still consult with Akkasah on matters ranging from the development of a website to help promote the project, to helping them troubleshoot technical issues, to new equipment purchases and configurations, to the creation of displays of the physical items for viewing out in the main library space. The CDS Audio and Visual Media Specialist is helping the Akkasah team create a digital imaging studio in the CDS for fragile photo albums that cannot be scanned on flatbed scanners, so that they do not have to be shipped to New York for digitization.

Little did we know at the time that we made the decision to partner with Akkasah and move it into the CDS, that we were in turn enabling the library to envision creative ways to partner with faculty on digital scholarship projects in the long-run. Akkasah has so firmly established itself as a part of the library and the CDS that we now refer to the "Akkasah model" when describing our work with long-term faculty projects, something that even a few years ago we did not have a clear vision for. This is a welcome framework for a space that is still relatively new and defining its identity, and we are not alone in this. The conversation around what digital scholarship and DH should look like in an academic library is active, with the Association of College and Research Libraries Board of Directors recently voting to approve the establishment of the Digital Scholarship Section to begin September 1, 2017 [7]. Many libraries are trying to understand what it means for the academic library to step into the digital scholarship world, and what it looks like to support DH within the library. It is the NYUAD Library's collaboration with Akkasah that has helped shaped the CDS beyond our initial vision for it as a "faculty help center," and moved it into a space

that supports long-term faculty research projects that in some way intersect with library resources (Fig. 11.3).

11.4 MOVING THE CENTER FOR DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP BEYOND AKKASAH

The NYUAD Library’s “Akkasah model” has given us a uniquely collaborative model to work with when engaging with faculty research projects, and we have seen this unfold in more recent initiatives that we have been approached with. None of these projects are simply collections



Figure 11.3 Two covered women in black with a little girl standing on a chair (17 August 1920, Turkey). Turkey Collection. *Source: Courtesy of Akkasah: Center for Photography at NYU Abu Dhabi.*

that exist in one unit; all of them draw together staff, space, technologies, and resources from across the library to create these multifaceted projects that involve rare items, conversions of items from analog to digital, publications (web or print), exhibitions, and new collections. These are not faculty collections that are left with the library to figure out; these are long-term, collaborative conversations and initiatives that result in established programs that allow for new scholarship in creative ways. We have also seen this relationship expand even further, as the university's Arts and Humanities division begins exploring programs in DH. We are well placed in the library to work with this fledgling program, and have begun partnering with the new DH professor to offer a range of programming around DH "meetups," again pulling together resources and units from across the library. One of our first meetups featured a talk by the Akkasah team itself, and a future meetup will feature a hands-on session by the Digital Content Manager from DLTS in New York, who regularly works with the Akkasah team.

The conversation around DH and libraries often veers toward the role that the library should play in these larger research projects. Many in the library science field advocate for libraries to do more than simply support or advise, but instead become true partners, furthering the values of the academic library for discovery, access, and preservation. As Micah Vandegrift writes in his post on "What is Digital Humanities and What's it Doing in the Library?" in the Library with the Lead Pipe:

Libraries and digital humanities have the same goals. Stop asking if the library has a role, or what it is, and start getting involved in digital projects that are already happening. Advocate for new expanded roles and responsibilities to be able to do this. Become producers/creators in collaboration with scholars rather than servants to them [8].

Rather than be a mere silent supporter standing on the sidelines providing tools and technology from "behind a desk," the NYUAD Library has worked with faculty to be a part of the process of creating digital scholarship. One recent project has the head of the CDS as a coprincipal investigator (PI) in examining ways to document, describe, and archive regional heritage music. Another has the former Archives and Special Collections librarian as a co-PI on a larger research project, thematically arranged around Global Shakespeare, and a third involves

both the CDS and the Archives unit working together with a visual arts faculty member to create a multimedia archive of regional artists' works that she has collected over the years.

We find ourselves bringing not only technology skills and sophisticated equipment that enable resources to be digitized, archived, and published, but an understanding of best practices in the areas of preservation, organization, and access, in addition to subject matter expertise offered by research librarians. We also serve as a democratized place on campus that is open to everyone, regardless of discipline. As Alexander et al. write in "Librarians and Scholars: Partners in Digital Humanities" [9]:

Library engagement with digital humanities often goes beyond basic service offerings to include consultations, developments, and pedagogy that reflect on the library's role as an interdisciplinary agent within the university. The resulting interactions with faculty and students represent a broad spectrum of activities that include general guidance on available resources to deep integration of library expertise and resources into the scholarly process for developing ideas, tools, and methodologies.

Alexander et al.'s description of "the deep integration of library expertise" has become more apparent in the CDS, where we have begun to find ourselves serving as translators to faculty who often throw terms like "archive" around loosely, when in fact what they are talking about is putting something on a hard drive and forgetting about it. The CDS is often the conduit to collections that end up in Archives and Special Collections, or, in some examples, projects that do not have a preservation element to them, but still need guidance around digitization, organization, and access. This is one example of the "library expertise" referenced by Alexander et al. that we have found ourselves explaining the most. What does it mean to truly archive something in a library sense? What does it make sense for us to archive as an intellectual institution? How do we help our scholars understand what this means, and how do we explain what we choose to preserve and why we cannot preserve everything? How do we help faculty move forward with projects that will not be truly preserved from a library's perspective, but are still worth developing?

One of the driving ideologies with our new framework for supporting digital scholarship projects using our “Akkasah model” is that we must not restrict ourselves to questions of scalability that can often dampen creative growth instead of allowing for new, innovative approaches to answering scholarly questions. Instead, we must be open to exploring ideas that allow for flexibility, and encourage project management plans that are not rigid. Keeping this in mind, we have tried to “just say yes” to project ideas that come into the CDS, watch how they unfold, and consider where we might support and contribute to them, instead of being fearful that they might not fit within a previously prescribed approach. Not every project will require the same tactics. We have to be cautious about trying to find the “one size fits all” model of engagement, and instead consider the unique circumstances of each project in order to move it forward in the appropriate ways. In short, agile approaches, which can also draw on standard practices, are best.

As Schaffner and Erway write in their OCLC report: “Does every research library need a DH center?” “A handful of models demonstrate successful collaborations with digital humanists, but one size does not fit all” [10]. They expand on this by stressing the need to “establish expectations early on about the library’s capacity to support any given DH project,” and encourage librarians involved in DH to “seek commonalities and connections among projects and ways to handle exceptions” [10].

What we have learned through our work in establishing our own CDS, and using our “Akkasah model” to guide, but not dictate, our work with scholars, is that there is no one framework to use when planning a space to support DH work in an academic library. The work that you do in your own center, and the models of engagement and support that you develop, depend on the resources available, and the research interests of your scholars. While it might share similarities with other spaces in the types of equipment offered, the staff that occupy it, and the programs it develops, ultimately the center has to be able to respond to the needs of its own research community. Understanding these needs will take time, as your own scholars begin to understand what they can ask of a space. Using an agile, but well thought out and responsive model guided by our core values of preservation, organization, description, and discovery, will serve us well.

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