

14 The UX of DH Workshops

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Digital humanities have been a fast moving, and quickly diversifying set of practices found in the contemporary university. They will probably remain that way for some time to come. It is important to stress, however, that even in 2022 they are still being discovered, experimented with and incorporated into educational environments in many parts of the world *for the first time*. Such is the case for the region in which we live and work: the United Arab Emirates. We believe that digital humanities (DH) events do not just happen; rather they are sites of social practice, combining imagination and design methodology with communities in a specific time and place (Richards et al. 2015). Our institution, New York University Abu Dhabi, encourages the weaving together of content and context as an ongoing, complex process in our curriculum, university and community events. When it comes to the design of digital humanities events and the potential societal impact they can have, we have kept close to this approach.

If we factor in the diversity of educational and linguistic backgrounds of the expanding pool of participants at DH workshops, and the complex social and infrastructural needs of such events, there are many different issues which must be taken into consideration. At the core of our work is a desire to balance empathetic and community driven approaches with a structure to facilitate the learning of digital humanities tools and methods. As Grumbach and Keralis note, “Avoiding buttonology and creating space for community building and empathy also asks us to reframe what it is we are teaching. Are we teaching software, or are we teaching the concepts and applications that the software supports?” They continue by “invit[ing] reflection on the socio-technical values that we endorse” (Grumbach and Keralis 2023). We have found clear links between event design and building

trust within a community of practice (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002), especially in the early phases of DH community development in the Gulf Arab states. Our main goal in establishing a regular DH workshop has been to identify the present and future members of the community, to begin to articulate values with the community, and to find ways in which that community can begin to contribute to the creation of the workshops. This goal has required an intentional, design-centered approach. The context of our chapter is not years of experience hosting DH institutes in our local environment, but rather the perspective of practitioners in a decade-old academic institution which has been working to define its role in the world of international higher education. Our institution has been experimenting with DH for only about five years. Drawing on the literatures of user experience (UX) design as well as knowledge and events management, in this chapter we reflect on our experience of designing DH workshops in this institutional “startup” phase (Hokkanen, Xu, and Väänänen 2016) and in a new geographic area of the world. We argue that notions such as *persona development*, *edge case design*, *inclusive design*, *future forward feedback* as well as *agile methodologies* are useful concepts for framing the process and increasing the chances of long-term success of the initiatives and community building efforts to adapt to unknown futures.

To our knowledge, the NYU Abu Dhabi Winter Institute in Digital Humanities (WIDH) in 2020 was the first major digital humanities institute in the Gulf Arab states, and the second in the Arab region.¹ Initially taking place across four days, it encompassed eight courses, poster sessions and networking opportunities with over 100 participants and instructors from around the world. The event brought together DH scholars and learners with a range of interests and experience levels. This was the first of what we had hoped would be an annual event, aiming to establish our university as a hub for DH work in the region. The host country of our university, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has been at the forefront of digital transformation in the MENASA (Middle East, North Africa and South Asia) region in many of its public sectors and increasingly so in the educational sector. From that perspective, the forward thinking and critical lenses characteristic of global DH practices seemed a natural match with the environment. The UAE also has a majority expatriate population, with the vast number of residents hailing from other countries, which is reflected in the composition of our own campus community. With faculty, staff and students coming from a wide variety of educational and linguistic backgrounds around the world, the campus conversations often revolve around what diversity might mean in such a context. Given that there was no particular precedent for a DH event in the Gulf region, we sought to lay the groundwork by using what we *thought* might prove to be the most attractive type of DH institute to such an audience. We were also keen not to represent ourselves as the sole place for Arab DH work, which might be an initial misconception given our location. In considering one of our main goals of creating an event that reflected our population, we wanted to move these conversations closer to regional considerations, such as language, resource availability, infrastructure and general knowledge of DH work. In other words, we drew on ongoing conversations in our own institution about diversity as a way of framing new DH scenarios for our community event.

Incorporating UX in the Planning and Development

Applying for institutional support for the event gave us the opportunity to outline our target audience, which we hope would include people with a great deal of experience in DH work, others who had dabbled in the work, as well as those coming to it as relative newcomers. Within that wide pool, there were varying technical infrastructure and resource pools at home institutions. We had the added challenge of incorporating participants who might work in non-English languages, especially less represented languages written in a right to left script such as Arabic. One solution we found for addressing the potential issue of trying to meet the needs of *all* of the unknowns, was to create WIDH through the lens of *UX personas*, designing the event for who we thought might be interested, given what we already know about the community. Personas, “stemming from the field of user-centered design (UCD), are hypothetical users that represent the behaviors, goals, and values of actual users” (Tempelman-Kluit and Pearce 2014). While our persona work was informal, it centered on a number of participant characteristics: previous background in digital humanities, institutional affiliations in the larger region (academic, GLAM sector, private), languages used by the communities as well as familiarity with, and availability of, data and infrastructure in the participants’ home institutions. Examples of personas we envisaged participating in the event included (1) faculty members interested in incorporating digital methods into teaching or research coming from the region and from NYU’s global network, (2) regional and network librarians who want to expand their knowledge of new trends in digital scholarship, (3) local postdocs in the humanities and social sciences and (4) actors in the local cultural heritage sector. That being said with these diverse personas, it was very difficult for us to say what cultural and linguistic horizons they would bring to the event. While the personas designing exercise was very helpful for our initial event, we have had to rethink them as a significantly larger group of participants has emerged since 2020 than we had initially expected.² Participants at our first in-person event included public humanities and citizen researcher groups, postdoctoral fellows in machine learning, even graduate students interested in global digital humanities, and even though our Winter Institute was not mainly focused around Arabic topics, many more scholars in Middle Eastern and Oriental Studies from Europe and North America registered than we expected. Moreover, even though the timing of our first in-person event in 2020 precluded many undergraduates from attending the program, we did get interest from a number of last year undergraduates who were doing capstone research as well as from students who wanted to attend, but could not due to their January term course load. Another surprise we encountered were the institutions who took advantage of the event to send a whole cohort of participants.

In UX theory, developers are encouraged to prototype for what designers call “edge cases,” or those that might lie at the outer boundaries of the main constituency. It has been noted that “edge cases that are not addressed can negatively impact the user experience” (Chechique 2021). In the content of DH workshops, edge cases might be considered users working in different languages, with different cultural backgrounds or worldviews, or even participants coming from institutions with different infrastructural development, connectivities or institutional

ambitions. As Daniel Paul O'Donnell, Katherine L. Walter, Alex Gil and Neil Fraistat write in *A New Companion to Digital Humanities*,

for the most part . . . [DH] international and collaborative activity is conducted along a primarily east–west axis among a relatively small number of mostly contiguous high-income economies in the northern hemisphere: Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Canada, the United States, the countries of western and central Europe, and, in the South, Australia and New Zealand.

(2015, 493)

We were operating in an entirely different sphere. In reality, designing for the edge in a super diverse country of the world such as the UAE – both for the people who reside there and for the people the country hosts as visitors – means not making assumptions about culture and language, but the process is much more than simply planning for a diversity of individual participant identities. We must steer away from monolingual, monocultural and singular institutional profiles in the way that we imagine our participants, what they bring to the event and what they will be able to take back to their home institutions.

Our initial challenge was all the more difficult because we wanted to build an event that not only attracted people who were already familiar with DH, but also to work toward building a wider community who were not deeply familiar with its global variety of practices and to enrich those practices with the diversity of these new audiences. Whereas we designed WIDH 2020 as an introduction for local and regional audiences, including the members of our own highly globalized campus, we were pleasantly surprised to find that a significant number of participants registered to come from far away to attend in person. This highlighted a missing persona within the Middle Eastern or Muslim context, the university's affiliation to a network of global sites, as well as DH scholars working within, or identifying with, non-Western frameworks. With the wide variety of registered participants one of the “designing for the edge” strategies we adopted for our DH institute was to develop a wide spectrum of programming which would appeal to a variety of participants, providing workshops that were more introductory and theoretical in nature (Open Forms of Knowledge; Data in/and the Humanities) to help those new to the conversation begin to learn about some of the more fundamental ideas behind DH work and to steer local and regional conversations in new directions. At the same time, we also set up courses focused on learning a specific technical skill (Text Analysis of Arabic; Python Fundamentals for Humanities Research) for the more advanced participants. We also knew that, given the vibrancy of the cultural heritage in the Gulf Arab region and the UAE in particular, we wanted to offer at least one course on digitizing cultural heritage objects. On the other hand, we did not offer courses in XML or digital editing which might be considered staples of Western DH workshops, largely because, to our knowledge there is so little textual scholarship in the universities of internationalized higher education. Likewise, workshops in project management or LOD/semantic web seemed to be a stretch for regional newcomers to the field. We hoped that a well-designed event would provide participants with a number of takeaways spanning multiple topics, tools and resource types where connections could be found to scholarly trends in

the region, matched with the maturity of the conversation on digital scholarship. We labeled our course descriptions in the case where specific prerequisites were required, but for the most part we conceived of these first events as open to all levels.

Incorporating UX in the Event Itself

While designing these activities for the first Winter Institute – the workshops, poster sessions, networking opportunities and keynote address – we attempted to model the various wants and needs of our attendees. It has been argued that UX design “is meant to promote an engaging and usable experience, and for that it must be relevant for the user” (Ferreira 2016). Carrying out an event modeled on events from outside the region, no matter how sophisticated it might be, would have run the risk of not being relevant. It was important that we be thoughtful in our approach, ensuring we provided an experience that mattered to our attendees. We sought to avoid creating the context in a vacuum, but instead to consider the wider spectrum of our attendees. We invited our keynote speaker from the Centre for Internet and Society (CIS) in Bangalore, Puthiya Purayil Sneha, to speak on the topic “Alternate Histories and Futures: Digital Transitions in Archival Practice in India.” Similarly, our poster session included students from our home institution, faculty, librarians and staff, with topics ranging from Syrian-Lebanese Book Culture, spatializing UAE phone directories and the use of audio essays in the university classroom in Singapore. Simply put, the event was structured around cultural content relevant in our immediate context, modeling forms of research which participants might imagine themselves carrying out some day. One UX designer, Ian Batterbee, has also championed *social inclusion* as one of the key principles of a UX toolkit (2021). As the organizers, we also felt it was important to establish a shared sense of community and belonging that fostered a safe, respectful and collegial environment. As such, we created a code of conduct to help establish such a space for learning, allowing all voices to be heard and to “protect an environment conducive to intellectual pursuits, respect the rights of others and the University’s resources and spaces” (“Code of Conduct” n.d.). Given that the university library hosted the event, we felt it was important to note the importance of being respectful of the space itself and the myriad resources used to support it. Knowing that our attendees came from a range of institutions with varying resources and experience levels, we also felt it important to establish an environment that encouraged participants to “communicate with each other in ways that respect difference, while showing compassion, empathy and understanding, instead of assuming that we are ‘all on the same page’” (“Code of Conduct” n.d.). Creating a value-centered document for the space of our event has proven to be an effective way to start off on a strong footing, clarifying the direction of the event for the audience of diverse edge users, but also allowing us to lean into storytelling and narrative to shape the identity of the event, including in its future iterations (Bevolo 2014). To construct our initial code of conduct we drew on existing models, including those at the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (“Statement of Ethics & Inclusion” 2018), as well as codes of conduct from

our own library, the Association of Digital Humanities Organizations (“ADHO Conference Code of Conduct”) and the Digital Library Federation (“DLF Code of Conduct”).

Using UX Principles to Assess the Event

An event focused around the new, emerging DH community in our part of the world needed not only to create personas as part of its planning, development and execution, but also to revise them for assessment and redesign of later iterations of the event – especially in these early stages of community building. Along these lines, another important UX concept, *user feedback*, proved quite important to the way we took stock of the initial event and what participant takeaways were. At the very end of the WIDH 2020 we carried out a volunteer survey among participants to see what specific elements of the event had made an impression on them. By user feedback, we do not mean assessing how the event went from the perspective of institutional compliance or learning outcomes (an assessment process our readers will be familiar with from the assessment of academic curricula and research); instead, we were most interested in the notion of *future forward feedback*, or “feed-forward” as it has been dubbed (Hirsch 2017). With participant consent, we published a small selection of those on our event site (“Feedback” n.d.). Of particular interest to us were positive experiences we could replicate – ideas for potential growth which could be implemented in the future – or new ways of conceptualizing how DH fits into local and regional ways of knowing.

What was notable is that while we didn’t specifically ask our attendees to address questions of community in their post-event survey, this topic emerged as a central in the majority of the responses. Participants commented on how important they viewed the community building and networking possibilities on the level with the specific subjects of their workshop they came to study. Since our 2020 institute was not designed as a one-off event, but rather an inaugural experience, such feedback has proved to be successful in moving subsequent events closer to the shared values and interests of the participants. Put another way, the participants have been invited into the design of the event as an event, but also of the value systems which underlie it. Using participant feedback to shape a DH event, we see in that respect, as less of “problem solving activity, . . . as a contributor to value creation and an ongoing pursuit carried out over time and space” (Orefice 2018). One element of DH events which can be gleaned immediately from the feedback and the virtual events is how attendees appreciated geographical diversity of participants and perspectives from across the spectrum of university roles, ranging from educational designers to postdocs and even undergraduates. Less than two months after the WIDH in January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic swept over the world, disrupting most in-person academic events and opening the door to a wide range of new remote formats. Over the next two years, at which point we are writing this reflection, the idea of an event as an opportunity to build community and link it to an expanding notion of values for that community has proven to be very relevant for us. In that time WIDH put on a series of shorter, virtual events and even partnered

with New York City Digital Humanities (NYCDH) week in February 2021 and the International Council on Archives (ICA) in November 2021. In these WIDH events, co-instructors from the inaugural events started teaching new topics and on their own; moreover, several WIDH participants became first-time instructors, in particular, museum professionals, postdocs, master's students, even one recent undergraduate from NYU Abu Dhabi. Our programming during the pandemic was quite experimental. In retrospect, it showed us how the community was growing as much as it helped us to see the virtual event as an extension of our physical one (not surprisingly) reaching significantly greater audiences.

Balancing UX and Agility in Planning for the Unknown

Normally, after we had submitted our report about our first version of the WIDH to our funders in February 2020, we would have begun to plan a follow-up event, using the feedback we received to make slight adjustments to the in-person content and structure. We could never have expected, however, how the sudden transition to remote formats in March 2020 would open our community to other participants throughout the world. In fact, the scaling up of the Abu Dhabi-based workshop attracted strong participation from distinctly non-Western locales, in particular from the MENASA region (see Figure 14.1).

As the 2020–2022 pandemic years have shown us, public health and mobility have been significant disruptors to maintaining cross-borders communities, and reconceptualizing the event in different formats has required a significant amount of flexibility. Whereas the principles of UX mentioned earlier (edge case design, future forward feedback, etc.) proved valuable for planning what we saw as an annual event with a limited in-person audience, the remote sessions were much more difficult to plan and to execute. The numbers and diversity of participants who attended made their execution and their assessment difficult.

The disruption in planning for future in-person events taught us about the need to practice agility in our event design. *Agile methodologies* are a well-known style of project management which have garnered attention, particularly in the world of software development. They emphasize the need to deliver software products in a sustainable and reliable fashion, despite the rapid changes of enterprise environments. The different varieties of these strategies (Agile, Scrum) are not new to the worlds of event planning and management which have encouraged shorter iterative cycles to events to minimize risk (Lutkiewicz 2015; Gustavsson and Rönnlund 2010); the recent public health crisis has most definitely reminded us of this necessity in many sectors. There are potentially tensions between agile methods and the UX design principles we outlined earlier, and these tensions have the potential to place stress on the creative work of event design and community building. Whereas the former focuses on the ability of teams and individuals to self-organize and change, sometimes even in the late stages of development, the latter is a slower, reflective process centered on ideation, design and testing of experience. We do not mean to claim that the two approaches are incompatible. Instead, if we think about this tension in our scenario of the creation of a DH event as a means of community building, when an



Figure 14.1 A tweet by @DJWrisley showing a map of the 300+ registered participants for the remote 2021 NYU Abu Dhabi Winter Institute in Digital Humanities.

event is required to change at the last minute or it grows quite quickly, stress is placed on its storytelling function, with communities in earlier stages of formation more adversely impacted. Furthermore, if the community grows and participants continue to see themselves as mere users or consumers of the event instead of “self-organizing” stakeholders, it can become difficult for the event to manage participant expectations.

Conclusion

We have focused here on the scenario of early DH community building in the UAE and principles drawn from UX design which we used in creating a number of DH events and workshops, contrasting them with agile methodologies. Our intention in designing our event was to maximize a feeling of belonging among a large number of participants coming from different kinds of communities. Design,

we have argued, like event planning is not a one-time endeavor, but an iterative process which needs to be carried out in dialogue with the members of that community. We have discovered that there is significant interest in the larger region and that there are not many opportunities for on-site DH workshops nearby, but also that our ability to build a community via our workshops will depend on a number of factors, not the least of which is mobility. We do not fully know what our DH events of the near (and more distant) future will look like, nor how often potential participants will be able, or willing, to travel internationally. More time must pass to observe how academic life cycles adapt to such disruption and how the community and its needs change. All of this means rethinking our participant personas and our strategies for inclusion, even designing methods for user testing in our local environment (Becksford, Hammer, and McNabb 2021). Design, in other words, is not immune to larger societal disruption, but intimately connected to it. Whereas we have every intent to return to in-person events, the shifting possibilities on site for events with international audiences have required us to think more deeply about other strategies for *community continuity* as we move forward. What is sure is that the moments between the different DH events we have organized served as an opportunity to sound the opinion of our community, to respond to it and encourage it to be a part of the creation of subsequent programming.

Notes

- 1 The first such institute took place in 2015 at the American University of Beirut (<http://dhibeirut.wordpress.com>), co-founded by Wrisley and his colleagues in Beirut. The WIDH's website is <http://wp.nyu.edu/widh>. An archive of WIDH programming can be found at <https://archive.nyu.edu/handle/2451/61964>.
- 2 We aimed to have around 50 participants in the first in-person event, whereas we ended up with double that. In subsequent online events, we had very large numbers sign up, in particular in the online 2021 version which had more than 300 people sign up.

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