

'Databases for young historians': a practice-based crash course

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In January 2016 we organized a course to support young historians who were willing to build databases for historical research but lacked the education and basic practice to undertake the project. The course was sponsored by the Posthumus Institute, the Amsterdam Centre for Cultural Heritage and Identity (ACHI, UvA), the Huizinga Institute and the Huygens-ING. Because of the overwhelming interest we consider organizing a new edition and/or a follow up of the course and we wish to bring this to the attention of the DH Benelux participants. We hope to generate discussion about didactics in digital humanities in order to further develop the course and help enhance future projects.

Background

Little by little, the Digital Humanities are being introduced in history curricula at Dutch universities in the past few years. Even though the Netherlands is one of the leading countries in research and education in this quickly evolving digital area, most young historians who already have formally completed their educational phase miss necessary knowledge to participate in this promising field of research. This is not the result of a lack of interest from junior scholars, but due to the fact they stand between the generation that did not grow up during the current rise of computational humanities and the generation presently following a Bachelor or Master program. Furthermore, requirements for recent vacancies

show that digital skills are not only important for young historians' current research, but also more generally for their future academic life.

Goals

The goal of this course was to provide the participants with elementary skills and knowledge to design their own database. Therefore, the course was mostly practical, with participants working with laptops on different organized tasks and homework assignments. As presenting and sharing the database and/or the resulting visualizations online is an important aspect, this course allowed young historians to support their research conclusions with the data they are based on and serves as proof of their computational skills for future applications.

Didactic approach

The programme was designed around the principle of encountering specific practical challenges that triggered debates about the tensions that are more generally involved in making a database for historical data. This approach, opposed to the classical method of making practical experiences wait until the theory has been digested, proved very efficient and stimulating. Having participants discover their own obstacles boosted reflection on the key issues we sought to discuss because it reflects day-to-day learning processes and enhances critical thinking that moves from the concrete toward the abstract.

Participants applauded this practical approach because it helped them become acquainted with a vocabulary and workflow that was new to them in a rapid, clear manner. Moreover, it prompted them to search for similar issues across diverging data models, therefore grasping the abstract implications of their own inquiries. After the course, they felt ready to relate to the field of historical databases and be critical of different approaches. This praising feedback from students as well as from the teaching staff encourages us to continue developing this educational program.