Dictionary of Sydney

The following is the text of Dr Lisa Murray's talk Local history - Making connections in the digital age - *at the Glebe Society Glebe Society's Annual General Meeting on Sunday 28th August 2011, 11am at Benledi*

As a public historian, I have always been interested in local history and its connections with the wider historical narrative. With the flourishing of the internet, there are whole new ways we can share our history, find out new information, and make connections. But how is the digital humanities revolutionising history at a local and national level?

Today I want to reflect upon this new area of historical production that is part of the digital humanities. What does digital history mean for local and community history - particularly how we research it and produce it? And what impact can it have on broader historical understandings?

As many of you will know, I'm involved in a fantastic community public history project called the Dictionary of Sydney. The Dictionary of Sydney is a born-digital history project, conceived as a freely available resource presenting scholarship on metropolitan Sydney's history. www.dictionaryofsydney.org

Now, a purely digital history redefines the possibilities for urban history and public history. Using the Dictionary of Sydney as a case study, and drawing on a few examples from the Glebe area, I want to share with you some of the ways I think local history is taking on a much greater significance in historiography in the digital age. A pretty heavy topic, perhaps, for a Sunday morning; but I know that the Glebe Society is well into the digital age – launching your Glebe walks online and looking at updating and expanding your website. The opportunities for digital history are exciting and I hope you too will be invigorated by the possibilities the digital humanities throws up for presenting Glebe's history.

A couple of years back, American scholars Seefeldt & Thomas (2009) published a review of this new area of historiography. In an article called "What is Digital History?" they made the distinction between three genres or types of digital history.

1. digitisation projects; such as the National Library of Australia's digitisation of newspapers
2. presentation layers of historical knowledge; a form of digital publication such as online exhibitions or e-books; or the Glebe Walks, which the Society has recently launched online.
3. new-model scholarship; where digital technologies are used to visualise history in new ways, develop new research questions and undertake historical analysis in new ways

The Dictionary of Sydney is a blend of the second and third types of digital history – it is both a form of digital publication and it is also a type of new-model scholarship, using digital technologies to visualise history in new ways.

It is an innovative mix of history and technology that connects people, place and time, and provides a unifying framework for telling the diverse stories of Sydney's history and culture, with multiple authors and contested interpretations.

Why do digital history? What are the benefits and what can it do for local history?

I think the digital humanities transforms the way we do history in five key ways:

- liberation from the page
- connectivity
- collaboration
- community
- innovation

Moving beyond the page

Most of us here today would agree that there are tangible benefits of digital history; these benefits arise because of the move away from the printed page. In the world of digital history, there can be fewer restrictions on word length, so detailed pieces can be curated and published for niche audiences. There is also no limit on illustrations - they can be seen in glorious colour and delivered in high resolution so every detailed element can be appreciated. The range of sources that can be effectively presented is widening. Digital history can now make the most of audio-visual sources – oral histories and archival film footage can be included. Digital technologies allow for time-spatial mapping. Geographical information can be used to chart places and buildings on maps and linked to a timeline. Historical maps can be geo-referenced and stretched over contemporary maps, made transparent to allow comparison with the current street grid, and zoomed for details.

Connectivity

Another astoundingly simple but exciting element of the digital humanities is connectivity.

Encyclopedias have always presented disparate material, with cross references. Historians have often done this too. And indexes in books also provide connections, but only within one book. Now in the digital age, we can link across articles and across the world. Each piece of information can become suspended in a web of connections. Family history gets connected to the bigger urban picture; and the historical networks of families, businesses and communities come alive through these connections.

Connectivity is changing both the way historians write and how history is produced.

By linking apparently disparate articles through a name or place in a project like the Dictionary of Sydney, facts can be cross-referenced or triangulated and discrepancies brought to light. But more importantly, many new references have become accessible through digitisation projects without spending months in libraries – allowing new lines of historical inquiry to be easily pursued. Research from 20 or 30 years ago is only enhanced by the modern research methodologies enabled by digitisation projects. And this is one of the exciting opportunities of the digital humanities.

Another outcome of digital history is unexpected connections. Cross-references and connections in time and space emerge that are unknown to all or any of the authors involved.

Let me give you an example of the way the amalgamation, layering and linking of articles in the digital humanities can make new connections and bring scholarship into new contexts. We had an article in the Dictionary of Sydney about the Garrison Church in Millers Point that identified Edward Flood as the builder. When we created Flood's person entity listing we also drew upon biographical information published on the City of Sydney and NSW Parliament's websites which identified Flood as Mayor of Sydney and a member of parliament. Then an article about Sport was submitted, and it mentioned that Edward Flood was also a founding member of the Australian Cricket Club. Now the sporting historian and the architectural historian may not necessarily be interested in these two connections (and may not be aware of them) – but the local historian, the political historian, the social historian, the family historian may all have an ah-huh moment from these connections.

What does this mean for the way history is produced? Because historical text is always written with a purpose in view, writers edit for relevance. An enterprise like the Dictionary of Sydney undoes this editing, in a new way. A family connection, for instance, that a writer deems to be irrelevant and does not mention, will still be present in the historical model, and may inspire new questions of the text. So in the digital humanities, the historical model – the means of connecting and visualising the scholarship – contributes to our historical understanding, shaping and connecting the overall product.

Collaboration

By its very nature, the digital humanities feed off and build upon other digital projects.

The Dictionary of Sydney benefits from and is highly reliant upon many other digital history projects: such as having the Australian Dictionary of Biography online, digitised newspapers on Trove, indeed all the work done on online catalogues and digitisation of records. The National Library's Australian Newspapers Digitisation project is vital to the editors and researchers of the Dictionary of Sydney, and we use it every day.

There is now a critical mass of digital history projects out there that make the encyclopaedic and hypertext annotated ambitions of something like the Dictionary a reality. In this sense, the Dictionary should be seen as a highly collaborative digital history project.

The Dictionary of Sydney itself is a collaborative project – in terms of its research partners and financial partners. These include the City of Sydney, Sydney University, University of Technology Sydney, Historic Houses Trust, Powerhouse Museum, State Records NSW, and the State Library of New South Wales.

Digital humanities projects are forcing cultural institutions to look harder at their websites and their connectivity with digital histories. The Dictionary of Sydney has been created from the start with persistent identifiers and other informational metadata that allow text-harvesting and the sharing of content. Many other cultural institutions are playing catch-up. When the Dictionary of Sydney started five years ago, the State Library of NSW didn't have persistent identifiers in their catalogues, making it exceedingly difficult to link from the Dictionary to images and catalogue information. This has since been rectified, and so references are being updated and connected to the permalinks in the State Library's catalogue.

The digital humanities also use collaboration of authors. This goes way beyond the edited book or encyclopedia. Perhaps the most open example of this is Wikipedia, which uses the radical trust of web 2.0 engagement to write and develop all their content. Everyone can contribute, everyone can correct mistakes, but no authorship is acknowledged or attributed. The article changes with each addition and correction.

A slightly more conservative approach to authorship in the digital humanities is a shared authority process. This is the way the Dictionary of Sydney is going. Content production for the Dictionary of Sydney is a collaborative cross-disciplinary volunteer venture. Essays and entries are commissioned by the Dictionary of Sydney Trust, but unsolicited content, feedback and suggestions are also encouraged, and both kinds of entries are flowing in. Historians, archaeologists, heritage specialists and historical societies, experts, enthusiasts and amateurs – they are all writing for the Dictionary.

A shared authority model for authorship draws upon many traditional scholarship standards and places them in the digital environment. So, for example, all entries in the Dictionary of Sydney are attributed to authors, whose expertise, experience and knowledge is cited. Entries are dated as well; and all entries are persistent. Small modifications might be made to correct dramatic errors, but the entry as a piece remains persistent, along with its endnotes and references. This provides a stamp of authority and veracity that is sometimes lacking in the digital environment.

The Dictionary has a guide for contributors to ensure some consistency of style and content, but the authorial voice is allowed to shine through. Some of our pieces are very scholarly, others more conversational in tone, and others have a more literary or arty approach to a subject. Such an approach would be much more difficult in the print format. The Dictionary deliberately acknowledges its authors and cultivates multiple voices. It reflects the commitment of the project to public history with contributions from all parts of our community.

Community (history) – the local and the global

Now let's talk a bit about community – and more particularly, the globalisation of community history. A project such as the Dictionary of Sydney has some really exciting possibilities for connecting the huge interest in family and local history with Sydney's urban and social history.

Through the historical model and navigational structure of the Dictionary, the fine grained and detailed local history can be juxtaposed with the city-wide, national and global perspective. The information structures, the linking and the presentation layers demonstrate the connections between local history and thematic history - loud and clear.

For example, If we browsed through the entities and hypertext annotations and links of the Dictionary of Sydney we can quickly discover that …GLEBE …
is specifically mentioned in entries on

- literature, (novel Living Together (1974) set around Balmain, Glebe & Paddington; + Peter Corris in Crime Fiction)
- the economy,
- planning,
- religion,
- tourism
- immigration, (Chinese temples at Glebe, Alexandria)
- and transport,

as well as in …

- education,
- charity and philanthropy
- and even an article on bricks.

Of course there are specific references to people and places in Glebe and they too get connected more broadly. Max Solling's article on the suburb of Glebe will be published later this year and will add to the connections and layers of Glebe's history. And there is a link from the Dictionary of Sydney to the Glebe Walks website.

The Dictionary also has the potential to connect family history, much of which is place based, into the city's broader urban history. The family relationships that shaped power, inheritance, property and influence in the early colony can be modelled and connected to the larger narratives of politics and development.

George Allen is an obvious example here. As we all know, he was the patriarch of the Allen family who owned Toxteth Estate, he was the First solicitor trained entirely in Australia and founder of one of Sydney's oldest law firms. He was involved in both municipal and state politics. But he was also passionate about education, being involved in the school of arts movement and a founder of Sydney Free Public Grammar School. These connections are all illustrated in the Dictionary through timelines, occupations and positions, as well as through entries.

This is one of the great benefits of a digital history project like the Dictionary. Suddenly the complicated relationships of a community can be visualised – who knew whom, who was related to whom, who sat on boards with whom, who did business with whom – all the community connections that make our society tick.

The Dictionary of Sydney is opening up avenues for publication, and this too is fostering local history and public history. Already, entries that were written for the Dictionary are appearing on other council and history society websites, as the licensing system enables authors to re-use their content. Similarly, if the author was agreeable, there is no reason why any content that has been written for the Glebe Society's website or for the Glebe Society Bulletin, couldn't also be written up and published on the Dictionary. The benefit of publishing it on the Dictionary of Sydney as well as in your Society's publication is that the material gets caught in the web of Sydney's historical connections and becomes part of Greater Sydney's story.

Innovation

Digital humanities are encouraging innovation in historical writing and historical research methodologies.

The Dictionary of Sydney's historical model, for example, with its strong emphasis upon place, geo-referencing and time, is forcing historians to be more specific about where and when things happened. Many of our contributors, particularly those of larger thematic pieces, have often found it challenging to drag the thematic back down to the particular. This type of digital history is privileging local history once more.

We are now a highly visual culture. And the presentation of digital history is encouraging historians to be much more visually fluent in their historical analysis and writing. There is an expectation that digital history will be richly illustrated and this will gradually lead historians to include visual cultures as a regular part of their source material. The same can be said to audio and film.

The expanding nature of digital humanities projects, where new information can be added and connected ad infinitum, will contribute to the innovation of new research questions and methodological approaches. In the case of the Dictionary, as the relationships between entities and places become richer and more complex, people will be able to query the Dictionary by type or relationship or year or area, and discover new relationships and patterns that can be mapped or further analysed. Over time the layering of articles will document the changing interpretations of a subject and, in the very long term as the layers increase, document the historiography of the subject. Thus the Dictionary will move from being merely a digital presentation of history to becoming a source for historical inquiry.

Dr Stephen Ramsay, a digital humanities specialist at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, argues that the digital humanities are dramatically changing the methodology of our consumption of information too. The proliferation of hypertext and interactivity encourages ‘browsing’ or what he calls ‘screwing around’. Of course, the digital humanities allow for more powerful searching and research methods. But, as Ramsay argues, once you have access to vast amounts of information, ‘screwing around suddenly becomes a far more illuminating and useful activity’.

This is true. And the Dictionary certainly gives readers and researchers the opportunity for meandering discovery. In this type of digital history there is no grand narrative, no defined pathway. There are multiple pathways, hypertext annotations and stories. The multiple voices and authors in the Dictionary of Sydney may be seen as a reflection of the diversity of the city itself – the places, the peoples, the histories.

As local historians, we live in exciting times. The digital humanities is transforming the way we research, write, publish and produce history. We have the opportunity to present local history in new ways that reflect our complex societal networks. We can connect the local history of Glebe with greater Sydney’s history and the global historical context. This type of digital history, as Stephen Ramsay rightly concludes, is ‘an invitation to community, relationship, and play.’ I hope you accept the invitation to join the historiographical revolution and I’ll see you out there in the digital age.