Humanities Alumni

Digital Humanities is the Future

By James Smithies

I can report that the skills I learned editing my thesis and polishing it for submission came in very handy

I've spent the six years since my graduation from UC in a variety of roles, including positions in the public, private and academic spheres. It doesn't always seem the case, because I've experienced so much these past years, but my time has been fairly equally split between teaching at UC and working in IT.

I completed my PhD in New Zealand cultural history in 2003, and after some time tutoring in the History and English departments, trained as a technical writer and worked for just over a year in the Christchurch software industry, writing online help for financial services and energy applications.

I jumped at the chance to head back to UC for 18 months as a contract lecturer in History, teaching a variety of courses in New Zealand history and developing a course in the History of Technology.

When that contract finished my wife and I decided it was time to see the world, so we headed to London where I worked in the IT department of a FTSE-250 company, as a Technical Writer, Change Co-ordinator, and finally Project Manager. I learned a huge amount at that company, and ended up working on a very pressured project for the International department only weeks before I left. It was quite an experience to work directly with a Managing Director, a Chief Information Officer, and a Director of a large multi-national all at the same time. I can report that the skills I learned editing my thesis and polishing it for submission came in very handy!

James in the Canary Islands

We took our time coming home, stopping in at the Canary Islands, Rome and Tokyo on the way and eventually settled in Wellington, where I now work as Technical Editor for the Solutions Delivery Group in the Ministry of Health's Information Directorate. It was a brand new role so it's taken some time to get up and running, but the work is challenging and varied. In the year I've been at the Ministry I've developed a knowledge management strategy, worked with an external consultant and in-house solution architects to define a technical architecture framework for non-functional requirements, worked with systems analysts to define a pseudocode standard and document business rules, consulted on the design and governance of metadata and asset repositories, and am currently co-ordinating the migration of a significant body of electronic documents into a central repository. All this is happening at the same time as I engage with external vendors to trial applications to control the documents. IT certainly can offer humanists a varied career!

In my years working in IT I've worked with people from engineering, science, maths and physics backgrounds, and only one other person with a Humanities background, but I suspect this situation will change. The IT industry needs people who are capable of robust thinking at both the micro and macro level, and the Humanities offer just this skill in its focus on both the minutiae of everyday life and the grand sweep of history. I've often been surprised at how my training in humanist logic, method and taxonomy has allowed me to hold my own in tight situations and contribute on an equal footing with the scientists, physicists and engineers who find their way into the IT sector. The ability to come up with practical, integrative solutions to complex problems is in no way domain specific, and in high quality teams you find that potential answers are valued no matter what their provenance.

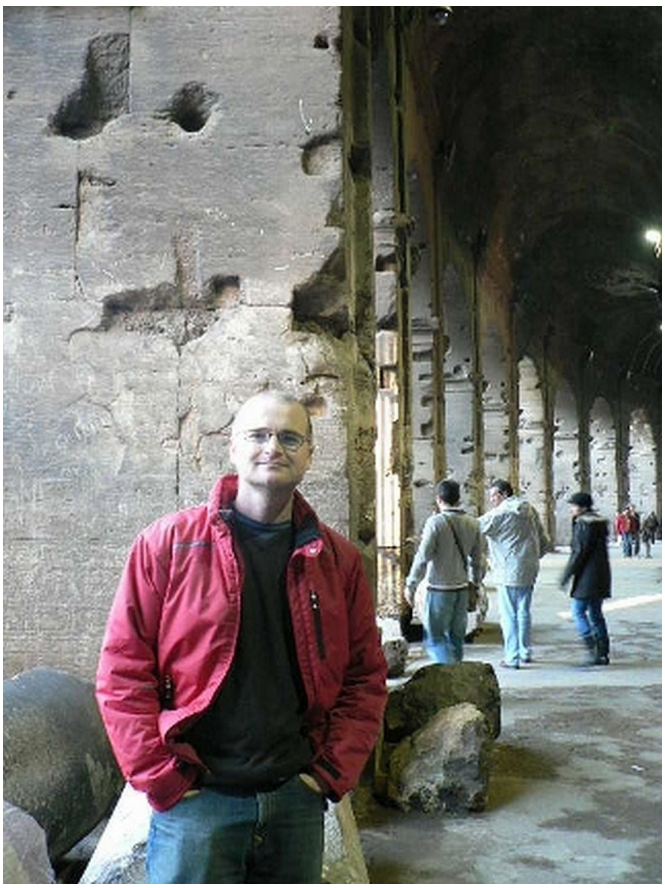
Over the last few years I've been challenged to learn a little bit about everything from logic gates to M9000 servers, from HTML to Java, from release management to enterprise architecture, and I've always found my Humanities knowledge (especially the topics involving more traditional modes of learning) incredibly useful. Indeed, one of the most interesting lessons of these past years has been realising that the boundaries between university disciplines break down in real world situations. In software engineering this is no more apparent than in the fine line between the logic used to run computers and the

logic taught in Humanities departments over the centuries. At some level all the university disciplines share a common seed in the humanist tradition, and it's been a revelation to see how this works itself out in contemporary high-tech environments. It's important to recognise that the sciences, engineering and math disciplines will always have different priorities from the Humanities, but in my experience smart people will grab a robust solution no matter what school of thought it stems from.

That leads me to one of my abiding interests these past few years, the digital Humanities. I got my start when I was lecturing in the History programme, have been experimenting ever since, and am happy to be involved in what is growing into a robust discipline with a healthy global network. The digital Humanities are basically an extension of the Humanities computing tradition that has been with us for decades, but is more focussed on the post-internet age and current moves towards the digitisation and sharing of global knowledge. The discipline is naturally oriented towards the open source and open access communities, and practitioners seem uniformly determined that the Humanities will be at the forefront of this latest revolution in ideas in the same way they were at the forefront of previous ones.

The last decade or so have seen enormous strides made, but there is still a huge amount to be achieved; despite the constant news about Ipads and Facebook we are really only in the very early stages of development. One of the biggest challenges will be working out how to bridge the gap between university-based digital Humanities courses and the commercial world.

Digital Humanities graduates are starting to move into key roles in places like the New York Public Library, but there has been very little progress made into the commercial world, where I think there are fantastic opportunities. Humanities students could become very important to large organisations in the future, as experts in knowledge management and the complex governance structures required to run the nascent 'Enterprise 2.0' systems. These large-scale corporate messaging and document management systems require skills that the Humanities naturally offer and CIOs are finding them difficult to roll out. While not many Humanities students will be involved in building these systems, thousands will be required to use them. The next decade will see big developments in the Humanities and publishing worlds too, so digital humanists (and, I think, historians of technology, who offer us the perspective we need on these changes) will have important work to do. If there's one thing my time in IT has made me passionate about, it's getting young humanists scholars trained to a point that they can contribute to the changes taking place around us and engage intelligently in the various debates.



James at the Colisseum

Digital Humanities aside, I've managed to keep up a slow trickle of research into the history of technology and New Zealand history and have recently sent an article off for consideration. Aside from dabbling in some creative writing, I'm hoping to finish an essay for a digital Humanities publication and start a new project investigating the presentation of technology in New Zealand literature during the early twentieth century. With the little time left after that, I expect I'll continue to indulge my passion for off-road running, make plans for more travel, and play around with some new online initiatives. I'd very much like to get back to teaching at some stage, ideally teaching the digital Humanities, the history of technology, and New Zealand cultural history at a university, but I may well find myself at a secondary school after some more adventures abroad.

Digital Humanities, also known as Humanities Computing, is a field of research, teaching, and technical innovation lying at the intersection of computing and the traditional disciplines of the Humanities. Interdisciplinary in nature, it involves technical practitioners as well as traditionally trained scholars with expertise in digital media. The focus is on computing with text and graphics. (Source: Wikipedia)