Reskilling for the Digital Humanities: Assessing Outcomes of a Developing-Librarian Program

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Introduction

In the fall of 2012 the Humanities and History Division of Columbia Libraries initiated a three-year training program for enhancing the skill sets of liaison librarians. The aim was to have these skill sets more closely align with the evolving research and digital needs of humanities researchers. This training program, called "The Developing Librarian Project (DLP),"[1] was created by and for the librarians and other professional staff within that division.

Two aspects were crucial for the program from the beginning. First, that it would be project based and team based, with the librarians of the division designing and creating a digital humanities resource together. The program is based on the assumption that learning must happen in context, a model the DLP team borrowed from the Praxis Program;[2] therefore the training is project-based, with all participants engaged in creating a digital humanities research project as a team. Second, that elements of assessment would be incorporated into the project from the beginning and assist the team to learn both from the project's successes and failures.

The digital resource that the DLP team chose to create was the website *Morningside Heights Digital History,*[3] which was publicly launched in fall 2015, bringing to conclusion the first phase of the project. This resource provides a coordinated collection of digital exhibits concerning the history of the neighborhood in which Columbia University is situated.

The process was as important as the end product. Each librarian in the humanities and history division chose a building or institution about which he or she did research and constructed a digital exhibit. In addition to individual research and exhibit authoring, each librarian was a member of a team that specialized in certain issues relating to the development of the site: for example, there was a project management team and a design team. Each member of the team was responsible not only for his or her own piece of the puzzle, but for working together with, listening to, and mentoring others to make sure that the puzzle as a whole came together. The objective was not so much the end-product itself but the skills and the forms of engagement that were fostered by the team-based approach to creating the site.

The following are the essential objectives of the two-year training program:
1. to assist librarians in learning tools and methods that support the emerging research needs and trends in the humanities;
2. to create a more interesting and engaging work environment for liaison librarians and other professional staff; and
3. ultimately, to provide librarians with a basis for engaging more effectively with the humanities research community across the university.

In "Re-skilling for the Digital Humanities: Measuring Skills, Engagement, and Learning," Bakkalbasi, Jaggars, and Rockenbach describe the training program and the assessment design in detail, and present assessment results at project midpoint. The focus of the present short paper is on the final assessment instrument, a Skill Set and Knowledge review, that was first administered in the summer of 2015, just before the public launch of the *Morningside Heights Digital History* website. For the remainder of this paper, we will describe that instrument and how its results will be utilized as we move forward into the 2.0 phase of the Developing Librarian Program.

Methodology

The Skill Set and Knowledge assessment instrument (see Appendix A) includes peer and self-assessment by allowing librarians to score themselves in each competency area and validate their scores by discussing them with a peer rater. In "The Place of Peers in Learning and Assessment," Falchikov argues that peer involvement in assessment has the

power to aid learning. Based on this premise, the instrument is designed to utilize peer assessment to allow librarians to make reasonable judgments about the extent to which their peers have achieved expected outcomes of the training program.

The skills that were listed for assessment were either drawn from relevant published literature or formulated based on the learning objectives of the three-year training program. For example, the second item under Behaviors and Attitudes, "Ability to gain an appreciation of individual research/project needs, including effective listening skills," was drawn from a list of desirable skills for subject librarians enumerated in the 2012 report *Reskilling for Research* from Research Libraries UK.

The administration of the Skill Sets and Knowledge instrument involved multiple steps. The first step that each librarian was asked to take was to fill out the self-assessment sheet. Each librarian was asked to assess herself or himself in the skills and knowledge competencies, in the top box of the sheet, and in the behaviors and attitudes, in the bottom box of the page. A four-point rating scale was used in which:

> 1 = Beginning, 2 = Developing, 3 = Good, and 4 = Advanced

At the same time as each librarian was presented with a self-assessment sheet, he or she was also provided with a peer reviewer sheet with the name of a colleague whom he or she would need to rank in all of these categories. The librarians were given a six-week timeframe in which to do their own self-ranking and to conduct two peer review meetings. In one meeting, they would meet with the peer they

had been assigned to review and discuss how they had ranked that peer and how that peer had ranked themselves. In the other, they would meet with the peer who had been assigned to review them and discuss how that peer had ranked them in light of how they had ranked themselves.

During that same six-week time period the director of the history and humanities division was provided with her own sheet, in which she needed to indicate for each individual whether the skill was essential or desirable for the effective performance of each librarian's role to support humanities researchers in an evolving information environment. Thus, for each librarian for each item, there were three coordinates: two numerical rankings, one from self and one from peer, and a category choice of "essential" or "desirable."

Findings

These response sheets were all returned to the assessment coordinator who collated them to create three documents:

1. A response sheet for each individual librarian showing all three coordinates for each item
2. A summary response sheet collating responses for all 10 librarians in the division and averaging together the self-assessment and the peer ranking into a single number (Table 1)
3. A distribution chart that enables us to visualize the relationship between the coordinates listed on the summary response sheet (Figure 1)

In Figure 1, the "Average Rating for Each Skill" is marked on a vertical 1 to 4 scale and the "Number of People for Whom a Skill is Essential" is marked on a horizontal 1 to 10 scale.

Figure 1, Distribution of Skillset and Knowledge Responses
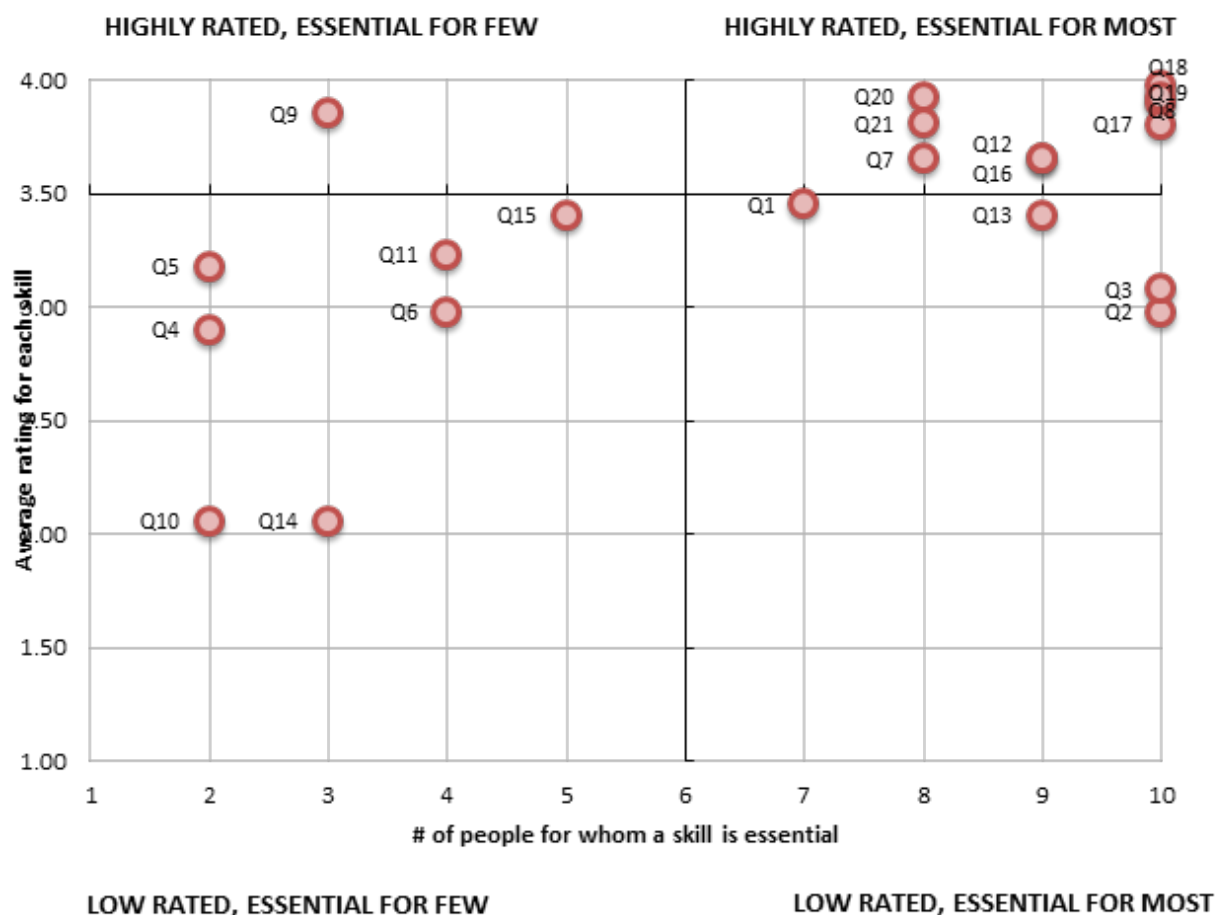
The placement of items on the chart allows us to make distinctions regarding relative importance. The areas most deserving of immediate attention are skills that are essential for most or for all librarians in the department. Thus items situated along the horizontal gridline 10, which are essential for all librarians, merit special attention. For example, at horizontal gridline 10 and vertical line 3.08, we find Q3. This item concerns "Understanding authors' rights, copyright legislation, etc." The DLP team will need to decide whether a ranking of 3.08 or "good" (as opposed to 4 or "advanced") is adequate for a skill essential for all. If it is not adequate, the director of the Humanities and History Division will need to work with the DLP team to determine how their understanding of these matters will be enhanced as the program continues. Furthermore, the assessment coordinator will be sharing with individual librarians the set of responses that were compiled about them.

Table 1: Summary of Skill Set and Knowledge Responses

#	Item	Essential for	Average rating
1	Scan and produce electronic text	7	3.45
2	Use of Citation Management Software to assemble a bibliography	10	2.98

#	Item	Essential for	Average rating
3	Understand author rights, copyright legislation, and intellectual property issues, and plagiarism, and to be able to advise or refer as appropriate	10	3.08
4	Articulate what a project charter is and why it is important in a digital project	2	2.90
5	Knowledge to advocate and advise on the use of metadata	2	3.18
6	Identify and assemble digital images using an image editing software	4	2.98
7	Skills in information discovery and literature searching in partnership with a project team to advance your own research and the team's	8	3.65
8	Knowledge of content (in all relevant media) available to my discipline/subject	10	3.90
9	Ability to connect the skills associated with requirements gathering to the reference consultation	3	3.85
10	Demonstrate an ability to set up a server on the internet	2	2.06
11	Ability to navigate platforms (Omeka & WordPress) and understand when to recommend the use of these tools	4	3.23
12	Identify special collections for use as sources for digital projects	9	3.65
13	Advise researchers on tools and methods for managing the research process	9	3.40
14	Understand Git and GitHub and the importance of using a repository for version control and collaborative projects	3	2.05
15	Understand the fundamentals and importance of project management	5	3.40
16	Awareness of current and changing local research interests	9	3.65
17	Ability to gain an appreciation of individual research/project needs, including effective listening skills	10	3.80
18	Ability to build strong relationships with researchers and other campus professionals and to establish collaborative partnerships externally, and to manage client relationships	10	3.98

#	Item	Essential for	Average rating
19	Ability to collaborate within department and with external partners	10	3.93
20	Propensity to share knowledge and ideas informally and formally with colleagues	8	3.93
21	Understanding of a typical researcher's experience, including their workflow, and how researchers access and use information, within a discipline/subject	8	3.81
	Overall Average Rating		**3.37**

Practical Implications

At the beginning of this short paper, we mentioned that phase one of DLP ended in fall 2015, with the completion of the *Morningside Heights Digital History* project site. But the program has not ended. The history and humanities division is now in a phase they are calling Developing Librarian 2.0, in which librarians hold regular meetings to share the results of individual research projects that include digital humanities aspects. In this 2.0 phase, they will be devoting time to the sharing and analysis of the results of the Skill Set and Knowledge assessment and using them to help determine where and how we proceed.

The Developing Librarian Project and assessment was based on the assumption that learning happens best when it is done as a team with support from peers. Peer-to-peer learning was crucial to this reskilling program and therefore peer assessment was a key component of the Skill Sets and Knowledge instrument. By taking responsibility for their colleagues' learning, the humanities and history librarians grew both as individuals and as a team.

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Endnotes

1. For more information about the Developing Librarian training program, see The Developing Librarian Project at http://www.developinglibrarian.org/.

2. For more information about the Praxis Program at the Scholars Lab, see: http://praxis.scholarslab.org/.

3. Morningside Heights Digital History, https://mhdh.library.columbia.edu/.

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Appendix A: Skill Set and Knowledge Assessment Instrument

Your name:_____

Please rate yourself as follows for each item: 1 – Beginning; 2 – Developing; 3 – Good; 4 – Advanced

	Skills and knowledge competency areas	Self-assess	Peer review	Essential/ Desirable
1.	Scan and produce electronic text.			
2.	Use of Citation Management Software to assemble a bibliography.			
3.	Understand author rights, copyright legislation, and intellectual property issues, and plagiarism, and to be able to advise or refer as appropriate.			
4.	Articulate what a project charter is and why it is important in a digital project.			
5.	Knowledge to advocate, and advise on the use of metadata.			
6.	Identify and assemble digital images using an image editing software.			
7.	Skills in information discovery and literature searching in partnership with a project team to advance your own research and the team's.			
8.	Knowledge of content (in all relevant media) available to my discipline/subject.			
9.	Ability to connect the skills associated with requirements gathering to the reference consultation.			
10.	Demonstrate an ability to set up a server on the internet.			

	Skills and knowledge competency areas	Self-assess	Peer review	Essential/ Desirable
11.	Ability to navigate platforms (Omeka & WordPress) and understand when to recommend the use of these tools.			
12.	Identify special collections for use as sources for digital projects.			
13.	Advise researchers on tools and methods for managing the research process.			
14.	Understand Git and GitHub and the importance of using a repository for version control and collaborative projects.			
15.	Understand the fundamentals and importance of project management.			

	Behaviors and attitudes	Self-assess	Peer review	Essential/Desirable
1.	Awareness of current and changing local research interests.			
2.	Ability to gain an appreciation of individual research/project needs, including effective listening skills.			
3.	Ability to build strong relationships with researchers and other campus professionals and to establish collaborative partnerships externally, and to manage client relationships.			
4.	Ability to collaborate within department and with external partners.			
5.	Propensity to share knowledge and ideas informally and formally with colleagues.			

	Behaviors and attitudes	Self-assess	Peer review	Essential/Desirable
6.	Understanding of a typical researcher's experience, including their workflow, and how researchers access and use information, within a discipline/subject.			