Report: Get going: The Nijmegen Spring School in eHumanities 2013

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Main applicants: Marten Düring and Mike
Kestemont
Support group: Antal van den Bosch and
Johan Oosterman

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Venue: Radboud University Nijmegen
Budget: €2000

Concept
We proposed an intensive three-day workshop (type: "general introductory
workshop") with the aim to equip both junior and senior scholars with the ability
and skills to "go digital". The goal of this workshop was to offer its participants the
skills to understand the potential of selected tools in Digital Humanities (DH), to
consider their application within the realms of their own field and, eventually, to be
able to start their own eHumanities projects. The workshop consisted of three
modules: Programming in Python, Statistics in R and Network Analysis with
Gephi. Workshops like these ensure the productive exchange between
participants as well as the instructors and, as such, the development of long-
lasting networks. In keeping with EADH's principal interests, the workshop placed
a firm emphasis on the computational analysis of textual data, be they literary or
linguistic.

The concept for this workshop differed from existing summer schools in
eHumanities mainly because of its short duration: Rather than investing in lengthy
courses over a period of 2 or 3 weeks, we introduced the participants to a
selection of critically important tools in the DH toolbox in a short time span. The
participants learned to identify the potential of these tools for their own research,
to collaborate successfully with experts and to grasp its potential for future
projects.

The workshop sought to provide as much practical skills and knowledge in as little
time as possible. Each module had the same basic structure: After an introduction
to the respective method and the targets for the day, the participants solved
predefined tasks. The workshop embraces the concept of trial and error and
learning based on one's own accomplishments rather than passive information
reception.

Application procedure and participants
The Spring School was widely advertised through (Digital) Humanities mailing
lists, Twitter, Academia.edu and LinkedIn. We expected between 10-12
participants but were overwhelmed when within a few days we had to not only
increase the number of places available to 25 but also needed to set up a waiting

list which quickly grew to another 30 potentially interested participants. Our participants came from the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom and Ireland. We therefore conclude that the format is highly attractive to researchers who wish to develop their skills in the above mentioned tools. We have also received many requests for a second installment on which we will comment below. The vast majority of all participants had either very little or no prior experience in any of the tools we had selected.

Implementation of the courses
The Spring School started with the Python course. Folgert Karsdorp and Maarten van Gompel had prepared an interactive learning environment (*Notebook*) which combined background explanation with live, in-document coding exercises. One of the instructors guided the participants through this course and was ready to answer any upcoming questions. In between, participants were given time to complete the exercises. The second instructor was ready to provide one-on-one tutoring. The course by far exceeds the 1-day tutorial and provides additional information and exercises for participants. It is by now publicly available at: https://github.com/fbkarsdorp/python-course.

Peter Hendrix introduced participants to the statistics package R on the second day. Questions on all three days suggested a significant gap between humanities thinking and the technical logic of the tools we taught. In the R session it became apparent that most participants lacked a general idea of how to use statistics in their research in the first place. Future courses should take this into account and provide a very broad introduction into the nature of statistics and their possible use in the humanities. Nevertheless participants have gained an idea in the basic architecture of R, how to set it up and about the course of statistics computing.

Clement Levallois introduced the network visualisation package Gephi on the third day. Participants gained a very good understanding of the software's components and were able to produce their own visualisations and to explore them. Additional course materials made sure that participants could reread any of the instructions and reproduce the exercises at a later point in time. Many participants to the workshop had a background in (albeit traditional) Social Network Analysis and seem to have been especially interested in the Gephi component of the Nijmegen Spring School. The organisers of future workshops might therefore want to take into account the considerable interest which seems to exist in this specific subfield of DH.

Feedback
After the course we asked participants to provide feedback on the organisation of the Spring School, the setup of the individual courses and their overall experience. Half of them agreed to fill in a questionnaire. Comments on all three courses expressed satisfaction with the overall setup and the acquired skills but asked for more time to further deepen understanding and applicability of the tools to their own research. We interpret these requests for "more" as a signal that we have reached our initial goal to lead humanists towards Digital Humanities tools and get them excited about taking the next steps.

Participants were asked to rate the applicability of the statement: "The Spring School delivered what it promised". Responses indicate a 4 out of 5 or 5 out of 5 agreement which leads us to conclude that this format should be repeated and developed further. Future editions should consider two days per tool and explicit room for coaching on their applicability to the participants' individual research.

Suggestion
Perhaps the EADH might want to consider to organise its own "Digital Humanities Summer Academy" of some sort in the future. The overwhelming response we got on our original call for participation (reaching even scholars from the Balearic Islands) indicates that there exists a huge "market" for such an event. Through the central organisation of such a pan-European schooling event, one might target an even larger audience in Europe and ensure the continuity and optimisation of the educational content offered each year. (We would of course be happy to consult on this matter in the future, if ever there would be plans to organize such an event.)