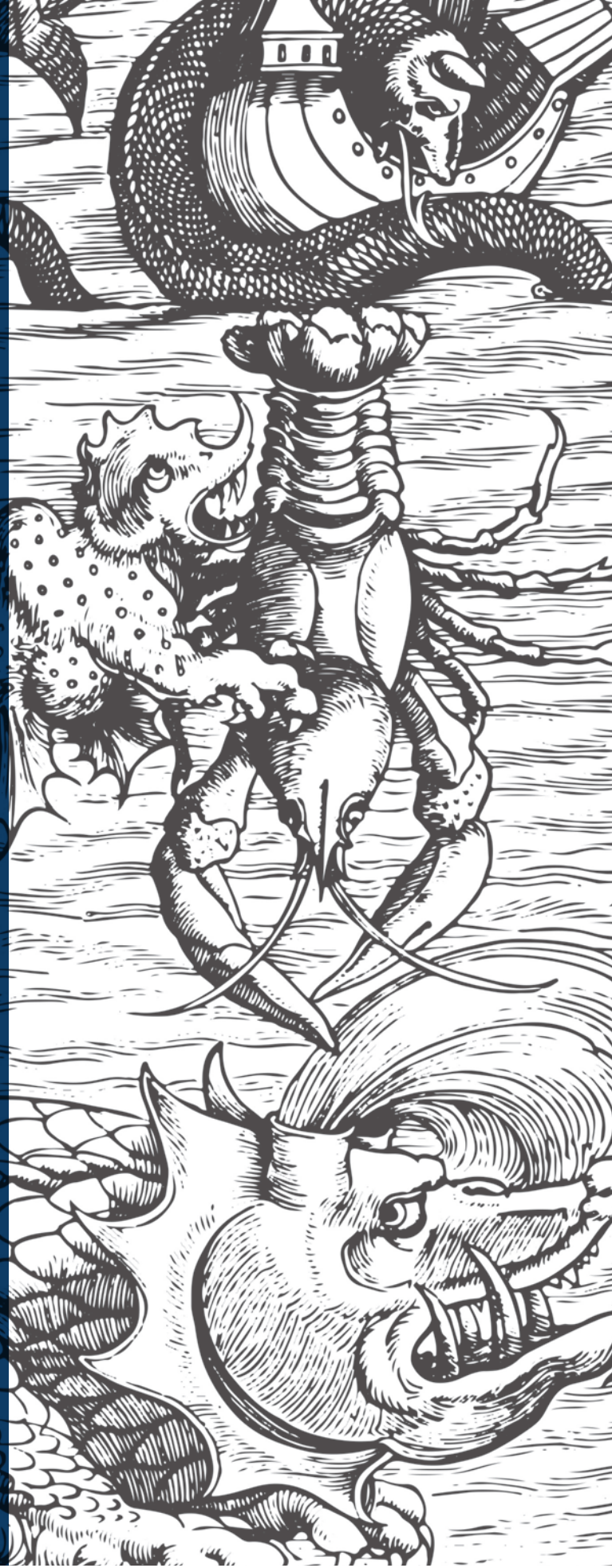University of Nottingham
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NOTTINGHAM CASE STUDY

CONTEXT, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND A WILLINGNESS TO EXPERIMENT:
DRIVING DATA LITERACY WITH GALE DIGITAL SCHOLAR LAB

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INTRODUCTION TO THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

The University of Nottingham is one of the UK's leading research-intensive universities. Regularly in the top 20 universities in the UK, its focus on international collaboration has seen it open campuses in China and Malaysia in recent years.

This case study was made possible with the kind participation of several members of the University of Nottingham's faculty, who agreed to discuss their work researching and teaching with *Gale Digital Scholar Lab.*
Professor Lynda Pratt is the Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Exchange in the Faculty of Arts; Dr Erin Snyder is the Director of the Digital Transformations Hub; and Dr Charlotte May is a Researcher and Training Development Facilitator in the Faculty of Arts.

CONTEXT, INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND A WILLINGNESS TO EXPERIMENT: DRIVING DATA LITERACY WITH *GALE DIGITAL SCHOLAR LAB*

Digital research and learning methods run through the University of Nottingham, particularly in the Faculty of Arts. As Professor Lynda Pratt, Professor of Modern Literature and Associate Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Exchange in the Faculty states, "We foster a digital research culture which supports all of our researcher communities to develop their full potential via engagement with digital technologies".

One of the strategies to enable this increase in capacity has been the foundation of the Digital Transformations Hub (DTH). The DTH offers support, advice, software and equipment for learning, teaching and research throughout the Faculty of Arts. The DTH Director, Dr Erin Snyder, summarises their mission as being "responsible for helping the whole faculty to enhance how it uses digital methods for research and in training the next generation of scholars."

ENGAGING FACULTY ACROSS DISCIPLINES

Nottingham was an early adopter of *Gale Digital Scholar Lab*, a text and data mining platform combining Gale's broad collection of primary source archives with powerful analytical tools. Dr Snyder expresses Nottingham's initial reaction to the *Lab*, "we saw the *Lab* as a way of easily getting these research methods out across the whole faculty of arts, and it's not just arts, I should say we're trying to bring social sciences along with it, promoting more widely than just into the faculty".

The University of Nottingham were in the top five global users of the *Lab* in 2020, a fact that can be attributed to the work of the Digital Transformation Hub, even as Covid-19 forced a wholesale change in the way the university operated. During the year they organised a series of workshops which were recorded and disseminated widely, and even as faculty switched to working from home, Dr Snyder was "amazed that we still got such a good number of people coming along to our workshops. The *Lab* is really a chance to use new research methods for research and for teaching, for people who don't necessarily think of themselves as digital humanities specialists".

For the Digital Transformation Hub, one of the real benefits of the *Lab* was how low maintenance it is. Dr Snyder explains that this simplicity contributed to the excellent take up in 2020. "We can use it, regardless of location - as long as you've got an internet connection. As far as digital tools go, that's a low level of infrastructure for us to support. We don't have to access it through a virtual desktop or be configuring specialist software packages – you can roll it out to your students and say, 'if you can come into this class virtually, you can still access this tool remotely, just as easily as if you were on campus'".

Encouraging faculty to adopt new practices can be challenging. "Asking people to do things in a new digital way risks being off-putting sometimes", says Dr Snyder. "Every time we want to bring in some new support or a new technology like this, we have to be really clear about who this is going to be useful for. We try to be very mindful of the investment of time and effort that we're asking of people to get up to speed".

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>
> - Dr Erin Snyder

THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGING WITH DIGITAL

Professor Pratt is a self-described "card-carrying, paid up fan of digital humanities", and currently serves as General Editor of a large-scale digital edition of the correspondence of Robert Southey (1774-1843). For her, the value of DH is that it "allows you to do things and to think about things in a way which, if it were more static and flat on the printed page, you couldn't do". In this sense, the *Lab* serves to further expand these horizons: "that's why I find the *Lab* really useful and important, and talking to my PhD students, some of whom are working on not dissimilar projects to the Southey letters, they're finding the same thing."

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As well as expanding the possibilities for research, for Dr Snyder, "the biggest benefit is that it broadens the pool of people who are able to do this kind of work – you're able to operate at scale now".

> ❝ *The biggest benefit is that it broadens the pool of people who are able to do this kind of work* ❞
> - Dr Erin Snyder

Professor Pratt agrees, "to have something where data can be processed for you, you're not required to code it yourself or know anything about the code that sits underneath it, is absolutely crucial. You're always going to have people who are really, really keen to know about what sits underneath, but I also have people for whom that knowledge is a barrier to entry."

It isn't only about expanding what is possible for their own research but expanding horizons as well. "I think of my own postgraduates who work on romanticism. They are all users of *Gale Digital Scholar Lab*, and they weren't before. And as they've upskilled, they have also begun to use digital environments as a way of forging international research collaborations and networks."

One of Professor Pratt's former students is Dr Charlotte May, a Postgraduate Researcher and Training Development Facilitator at Nottingham. In this role, she supports and trains students to benefit from the widespread digital shift in humanities. She says, "we need to move towards students feeling more comfortable with the digital, and we're also aware that our students are increasingly interdisciplinary".

Dr May also works as a trustee of Keswick Museum in Cumbria and is a volunteer researcher for The Workhouse in Southwell, a local National Trust property. She explains the benefits of tools like *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* in the context of research that is carried out in a non-academic environment there, "I can create a dataset which mentions the workhouse and its history. I spent 10 minutes putting a dataset together that researchers have spent years doing".

Dr Snyder agrees, "for students, if they're narrowing down a paper topic or a dissertation topic or trying to find interesting things in the data that might not be obvious, they can run these tools and they can do it really quickly, where before it might have taken a long time. It gives them a quick testing ability that they can then follow up on, and other kinds of research methods as well".

In connection with her research on workhouses, Dr May used the *Lab* to examine Robert Peel and Parliamentary discussions of workhouse legislation. "The main issue was words like 'Mr' and 'esquire' and 'baronet', but I was able to clean the data to remove those. I did get a nice Ngram about the sort of legislation he was involved in in the 1830s. It has highlighted so much material I would not have found otherwise through building the dataset."

KEY FINDINGS

University of Nottingham are one of the UK's leading research-intensive institutions and were a **top 5 global user** of the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* in 2020

The Lab helped drive significant archive usage, increasing engagement with *Gale Primary Sources* by **up to 40%**

Faculty leaders identified the benefits of a tool that **removes many of the barriers** to entry in digital humanities for students

Researchers found the *Lab* provides **significant time-saving benefits** and the potential to uncover new material

Using *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* is **enabling students** to develop invaluable transferable digital skills
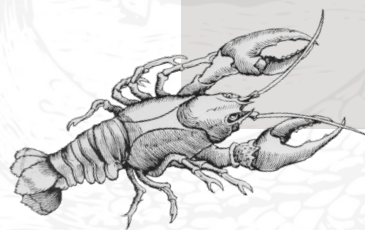
CONTEXTUALISING PROCESSES AND TOOLS

For Dr Snyder, one of the key tasks for the Digital Transformation Hub is to contextualise these new tools and processes for scholars who may be new to them. "Tools can give an impression of certainty, and it's important to give context around where that certainty is illusory". One of the things she recommends is to continue to apply the skills developed in humanities training, "I continually remind people of how they might apply the arts and humanities context skills that they're already expert in, to this novel area".

Context is vital. "One of the things we focused on is saying not just how do you use this, but why do you use it, when do you use it and what do these results mean? How would you interrogate this and how would this fit in with close reading?".

PROVIDING TRANSFERABLE SKILLS AND VALUE TO THE UNIVERSITY

Around the world, digital humanities is increasingly seen as a method of teaching transferable digital analysis and interrogation skills to students studying humanities disciplines. For Professor Pratt, *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* serves a vital purpose, "a tool like this allows you to develop new modes by which to interrogate a text, it does some of the work for you – from my point of view, as someone with a non-tech background, it does the 'scary stuff'. It gives you something you can experiment with, and that's really good. Experimenting with it in itself allows you to develop skills around communication, sharing, collaboration, interrogating information – all really important life, and work, skills. I think the *Lab* itself is a really helpful tool".

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>
> - Professor Lynda Pratt

Dr Snyder agrees – "It does help students, especially with the kinds of data that we're working with, we're working with really text-heavy data, and being able to do some sort of data analytics on that introduces students to it in a technologically straight-forward way".

She sees the *Lab* providing value to Nottingham in developing these skills. "We're dealing with more and more and more data. If you want to make big arguments, you have to be able to deal with lots of sources, which becomes very difficult at the scales that we're able to work with. So it's not necessarily a great use of my time or a professor's time to get to grips with the nitty gritty of the command line, or installing and configuring a piece of software.

They are experts in their subject area, and I saw this tool as a thing that I could give people who are experts in their subject area who are okay with technology, to give them the chance to look at large amounts of data and to use it without having stumbling blocks in that process. It expands what they're able to do without demanding that they learn a whole new set of tools".

All participants agree that having access to *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* has increased the value that the University gets from their significant investments in *Gale Primary Sources* by driving deeper, broader archive research. In 2020, with the University one of the highest users of the *Lab* worldwide, the number of *Gale Primary Source*s sessions at Nottingham increased by over 40%.

They also agree on how they would like the future to look. Dr Snyder would like to see "us doing a lot of digital on a regular basis, and it's not a novelty, it's just part of how we do things. This is how we do our research; this is how we do our teaching. We're at the forefront of making use of this technology – we're still asking arts and humanities questions; we just have got all these new ways of asking them". Dr May agrees. "It's about embedding it within teaching and making students feel comfortable with it and feeling as though this is the expectation and something that is normal within humanities as a discipline". For Professor Pratt this embedding of DH techniques allows students to "benefit from developing skills that they can take into the workplace and that therefore enhance their employability".