



Appendix – Postgraduate Feedback Reports

1) Tessa Whitehouse

I am a PhD student about to enter my third year of research into the cultural and intellectual world of eighteenth century dissent. One area of my study is the development of dissenting academies in the 1720s, over the course of which I have located and transcribed a series of documents (letters, notebooks, timetables and reports) relating to the foundation of and curriculum at two academies. I intend to develop these into an electronic resource to facilitate further research into dissenting academies, and to make the materials, some which are in poor condition and located in rather inaccessible archives, more widely available. I anticipate that the materials will also be of use to intellectual historians because of the wealth of information they contain about the subjects studied, the reading undertaken in the course of education, and the reactions to many writers (both classical and modern) which they contain. Social historians will find them interesting for the information they contain about day-to-day life in the East Midlands, practical information about living costs, and insights into gender relationships in the period, for example. The materials will form part of the website for the Centre for Dissenting Studies, a developing web resource which will ultimately host three databases and a series of four different archive projects. While my primary focus is on producing my own digital edition, I am also interested in working out how the Centre for Dissenting Studies website might best host these different resources, and what possibilities exist for linking them together.

The Digitizing Correspondence workshop was structured around a series of presentations: discussion of existing digitized correspondence, issues to consider when establishing a digital resource, a case study of the Bodley Diplomatic Correspondence project, and showcasing possible technologies for ordering materials including timelines and various models of visualisation. Throughout these presentations, emphasis was placed on the questions ‘what does this actually show us? How might it be used? Why would that be useful?’, which sounded the keynote of the day: that a digital project ought to aim to present its materials as accurately and helpfully as possible, and that, while some contextualisation is essential, it is also important to present the documents in such a way that they can be used for a variety of purposes by researchers.

In preparation for the workshop, a list of digital editions of correspondence was circulated, and looking through these provided a good introduction to the different ways of presenting materials online. I also spent time reading some of the printed editions of collected correspondence, such as Bruce Redford’s edition of Samuel Johnson’s letters and W.S. Lewis’s edition of Horace Walpole’s, and was struck by differences in the presentation of material and in how the editor’s role appears between electronic and print editions of letters. Many of the online editions we looked at favoured a full introductory essay in order to leave clear text transcriptions, while the printed editions offer heavily annotated letter-texts. As one of my documents in particular requires extensive notes giving publication details for the (many) published works mentioned, brief biographical notes on the (many) names that appear, contextual information about the development of dissenting academies and textual notes about the condition of the letter itself, I must think carefully about the presentation of the materials and the level of editorial intervention. An edition must look good, be accurate and scholarly, and be user-friendly. There might appear to be conflict in these aims, but the Bodley project offers a model of making various transcription views available to the user, who selects the one best suited to her purpose. Another model for digital correspondence I have been impressed by is the Electronic Enlightenment site hosted by the University of Oxford, where the letters are presented on a page which also has tabs to notes on other items associated with that letter: ‘enclosures’, ‘related documents’, ‘versions’ and ‘parent documents’. Each

letter carries links to an editorial page, with tabs for 'authorial notes', 'textual notes', 'editorial notes' and 'language notes'. In this way, readers are offered a semi-diplomatic transcript with unobtrusive links to notes, and have the option to delve deeper into the textual, material and contextual associations of each document. In short, then, as well as encouraging me to think creatively about the shape of an edition of my materials, the workshop triggered further thoughts and questions about the specifics of the edition I hope to produce. Looking through the resources helped me clarify my ideas about what I wanted my own edition to look like; how I envisaged it fitting in with print outputs of similar materials; and also how the archive might facilitate, and even overlap with, existing and future scholarly work using these and other related resources. Richard Holmes' recent collective biography of eighteenth-century scientists, *The Age of Wonder*, draws attention to the electronic resources of the Joseph Banks archive as well as the recent printed editions of Banks's correspondence edited by Neil Chambers and Holmes' work is itself an example of the kind of book that benefits from the availability of different archive materials in different forms.

Throughout the day, discussion returned to the pragmatics of developing a digital resource, and the key issue here was sustainability – who will host the site, and for how long? How will links be maintained within and beyond the site if migrating it to another server? While specific answers could not be supplied, raising the questions in the first place was valuable, and suggestions were made about how to build relationships with computing services departments in universities.

A particularly important feature of the day was the extent of roundtable discussion: people working with materials of different sorts, from different times, and with different aims for their projects raised issues they considered important and explained their intentions for their particular projects. These discussions compelled me to reflect further on the theory behind electronic editions and how we talk about them. It strikes me that are some problems with vocabulary: for example, how should we describe manuscripts that aren't letters, but bear some epistolary features? Ought there be specific definitions of terms such as 'material', 'item', 'work', 'project' and so on? Linked to this, is there a fixed definition of what an 'archive' is, especially in electronic terms? This is important as one of the innovative possibilities of electronic editions is to gather together scattered documents to create new, digital archives. Would these, could these, combine print and MS materials? The Rossetti archive is one possible model for this kind of integration.

A key point of the day was collective agreement on the need to create resources that are sufficiently flexible to permit varieties of research that the creator had not considered, and that would allow user-generated methodologies of research. I would have liked to extend this discussion further, by focussing more on the question of *why* our materials need to be digitized. This might help answer some of my questions about how to discuss them. The question 'are letters a distinctive type of material?' was considered in terms of technologies and funding – yet for me, it is an ontological issue as well. With my materials, for example, a printed version would make it particularly difficult to appreciate the differences in appearance of the various items which are nevertheless connected, some of which are presented as letters and some of which do not have the appearance of letters, but read as though they are. What particular features of an electronic edition might allow these materials to be presented in such a way that the circumstances of their production and the flexible use of them in their first lifetimes is apparent? There are no easy answers to these questions of definition and presentation; the workshop was invaluable for generating thoughts about how to tackle these problems.

Attending the workshop affirmed my sense that there is a community of scholars around digital editing, and it was heartening to meet other scholars who understand that working on editions can sharpen your own critical and analytical engagements with materials. It was also a useful forum for exchanging knowledge, including information about other workshops, conferences and digital projects, and references to articles. The 'Cultures of Knowledge' project hosted by Oxford University seems to me to be a rich and imaginative evolving model

for creating a digitally-based research community which weaves together archival project work and contemporary scholarly networks across Europe. The CELL website also combines research work with current debate, and these two resources offer encouraging models for evolving scholarship. I found the day immensely useful, and look forward to future events in the 'Digitizing Correspondence' strand.

2) Lizzy Williamson

The Digitizing Correspondence workshop held at CELL on 17th September 2009 provided a space for hugely fruitful, and necessary, discussion on the positives and pitfalls encountered by those producing or intending to produce online correspondence projects. The point was made at the beginning of the first session, on surveying the field, that it is an exciting and apposite time to be talking about this subject: a lot of projects are at this moment in their infancy and so there is a need to take stock of the current field. The Diplomatic Correspondence of Sir Thomas Bodley project is one of these new entrants, and as I am part of its project team I was very interested to hear about the 40 or so similar online collections. The statistics discussed were fascinating and occasionally worrying, for example hearing about dead links, the difficulty in finding some of the projects when conducting the simplest searches on Google, or that a full third of projects with a transcript-only set-up did not provide a transcription policy. This last point was especially shocking since we value the academic integrity of transcription and transparency of working practices very highly in the CELL online collections. Personally this allowed me to see the Bodley project in relation to the wider field, how it compares and fits in, but more importantly this overview made me realise how vital such discussion and sharing of values and approaches is, as facilitated by workshops like this one.

I think that this kind of discussion is vital to make progress in this relatively new academic field, to avoid re-inventing the wheel over and over in several small isolated projects and to encourage a degree of uniformity in the quality of working practices. This ties together aspirations for a uniformity of quality both in Early Modern transcription practice and in digitally-based research projects as a whole, and I strongly believe that the way forward with these is an ongoing dialogue between projects and institutions. The importance of teamwork, both within individual projects and between them, was discussed in the first round table discussion in the morning. We discussed how CELL's driving force in its online projects, including the Bodley, is a sense of teamwork and collaboration, and how on a personal level this allows us to produce more accurate transcriptions and fully interrogate ideas of editorial policy, and on a wider level allows us to balance academic and IT requirements in having fully trained IT specialists on the CELL projects. As regarding teamwork between projects, ideas were raised concerning creating projects to enable other projects, or some kind of central support for this growing community of digital research resources. This would be a fascinating avenue to explore, and it is hoped that CELL's Digitizing Correspondence project can be a part of keeping a dialogue open between those interested in constructing individual projects.

This ties in with the debates on inter-operability, of sharing not only methods and ideas but facilitating a meta-resource that encompasses all these research projects and would perhaps allow searching across project boundaries. Resource Description Framework (RDF) was heatedly discussed, where some people believed it to be un-workable and likely to be replaced with a more user-friendly system in the future, and some, such as a representative from the Cultures of Knowledge project at Oxford University spoke more highly of it and saw it as a possible way forward in the aforesaid project. I think that the Cultures of Knowledge project is an ambitious and valuable undertaking, and chimes with the current interest in pushing the limits of digital resources and really seeing how far we can exploit the opportunities the online format presents.

The workshop left me with a strong sense of the dual nature of this relatively new format for research; that there is great opportunity and flexibility in the digital over the printed but inherent in this is a danger. A key feature of this danger that came up repeatedly in the

workshop was the issue of sustainability and the naivety of much of the academic, and indeed the wider, community in the face of the rapid expansion of technology and possibility. This issue of sustainability is something that all projects need to address, and something that I hadn't fully appreciated. The Bodley project is well provided in that CELL are expert at maintaining their projects and considering future requirements, but it was a sobering moment when we discussed the risk that digital information is subject to, for example if one does not make provisions for the collection after its funding duration, usually a mere three years, or if one does not 'migrate' or upgrade the technological side of the project the resource may well become defunct. I was particularly struck by discussion of the aforesaid naivety of the academic world, and now see this as needing huge change and improvement. By 'naivety' I'm not referring to an inability to work with the digital, but rather a frequent failure to describe and justify the work involved; a lack of shared language between those funding, those working on, and those working with projects of this type. There is also a naivety concerning the long-term responsibility for such projects. Even people well versed in the workings of particular programs, i.e. quite capable of putting a project together, may not have considered issues of control, ownership and maintenance of the various aspects of the said project, and may therefore be putting themselves at the mercy of others in using, for example, their university's web address or proprietary rather than open access programs.

The risks inherent in these early days of digital research resources and their unpredictable future demand places of discussion such as this workshop; though the converse of this, the opportunities, are equally made more fruitful by debate. In my own research I've encountered frustrations with working with 19th century volumes of correspondence that lack even an index and thus turn searching for a key theme or figure into a very time-consuming activity. The possibilities opened up by digital collections are tremendously exciting for the researcher, and facilitate not just free-text searching (which we discussed as having the down-side of needing to know exactly what you're looking for) but also allow the organisation and re-organisation of material to provoke discoveries or interpretations never before considered. In the afternoon we discussed different ways of searching and sharing material, and I found the presentation on GIS or Geographical Information Systems particularly eye-opening as it gave a taster of the kind of spatial representation of data that is currently possible and readily available. We discussed how just presenting the information in a different, specifically visual, way can help one see it differently and draw new associations and conclusions. It was fascinating for me to see this kind of resource being used in English and History archival research; a field that does not routinely exploit such traditionally scientific approaches. The presentation in particular tried to draw out questions of what we gain from manipulating the data digitally in this way, and we discussed the importance of being aware of why we're choosing to develop certain features that the digital allows, so that we can avoid a 'bells and whistles' project with a pretty but essentially useless result. I was engaged by the idea of really interrogating which of the digital opportunities we exploit and why, and think that always asking what a feature adds is an essential way to proceed with the Bodley project. This made me think especially of the timeline addition to the Bodley site unveiled at the workshop, where the choice of organising the information by dates will now result in not a dry and heavy list of text but an interactive timeline where the dates of letters are plotted in a more visually appealing way. This is not just an aesthetic feature but gives an instant sense of the spread of the corpus and the relationship between the letters and time periods.

I came away from the workshop with a much better sense of how the field of digital research resources now lies, how it is changing constantly and quickly and thus how we have a responsibility to migrate not only our resources but also ourselves, keeping ourselves informed and our work not just accessible but relevant. The opportunities digitization provides are hugely exciting, but we should keep a constant eye on our audience; who is using these resources and how, and on our contemporaries managing similar projects, so we can aspire to a uniformity of quality and perhaps a degree of inter-operability.