Lessons Learned from a Digital Tool Criticism Workshop

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In this paper we report back on our 2017 DH Benelux workshop on Digital Tool Criticism. The aim of the workshop was to collaboratively work on a set of questions and a workflow for doing Digital Tool Criticism and to establish a protocol or checklist that can guide scholars in choosing and using digital tools for humanities research. The goals proved to be too ambitious to reach within a 1-day workshop. Nevertheless, the workshop was a success as it showed how group work can pave the way to a better understanding of the concept of Digital Tool Criticism. By sharing our insights with the wider DH Benelux community, we hope to establish a common ground that eventually will lead to a broadly shared protocol or checklist.

1. Set-up workshop

We wanted this to be a *hands-on* workshop where scholars work together on using and assessing digital tools for humanities research, where assumptions on how digital tools and datasets can be used meet the reality of data and tool limitations and lack of documentation, and where collaborative reflection might lead to experiments and workarounds to deal with these issues.

A total of 19 participants with a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds in humanities and information science did two hands-on group assignments, followed by a short round of presentations of the groups' findings and a general discussion. We decided to focus on the first phase of research, i.e. an *exploratory phase* of the research where scholars are iteratively working to establish the research question they want to address, the method(s) they are going to use and to underlying goals they are trying to achieve (i.e. why they want to study this). For this we used a model for research design by Joe Maxwell (2013) that is discussed by Trevor Owens (2014) in the context of digital humanities research (Figure 1). Scholars always bring their background knowledge, interests and preferences for methods and types of research to come up with a design, but this design is rarely a one step effort that happens in advance of data gathering and analysis. The process is often iterative, where assumptions about the availability and suitability of *methods, data and tools* are constantly challenged by

reality. During this process, research questions, data selections and choices of analysis are adapted to align them in such a way that the question can be properly addressed.
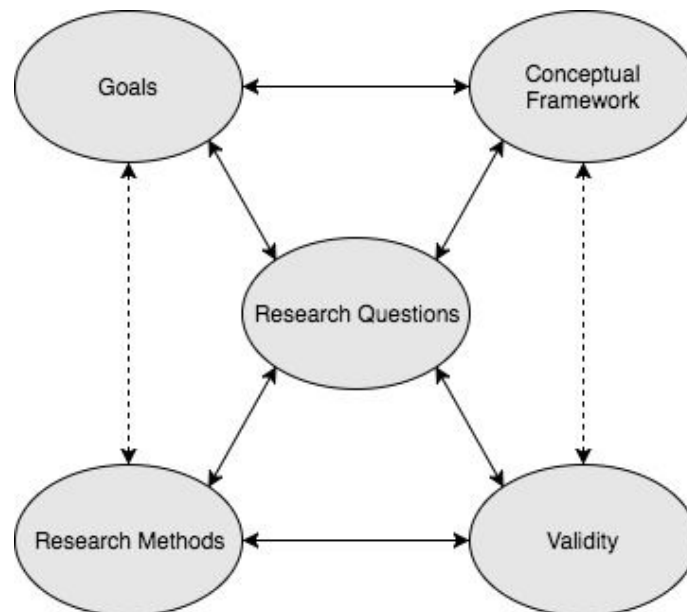

Figure 1. An interactive Model of Research Design, as developed by Maxwell (2013).

To reflect on the use of tools and to structure digital tool criticism, we presented our own very simple model of the interaction between research questions, data, tools and researchers to the participants (Figure 2). By explicitly making the researcher part of the model, participants were encouraged to reflect on how their own backgrounds and preferences play a role in how this exploratory phase takes shape. Here, the collaborative nature of the assignments allowed to bring these personal aspects to the surface. To give another framework for thinking about tool criticism and an explicit set of questions to guide this process, we also presented Andreas Fickers' set of five 'W' questions (Fickers 2013) and our own versions of these questions adapted to the scope of the workshop: Who created the tool, what kind of tool is it, and where, when and why was it made?

The first assignment focused on experimenting with tools and data sets to establish a research question, the second on how to select relevant data. Groups were explicitly asked to take *notes*, both in a Google Document and on post-it notes, to keep track of their steps, questions, choices, and problems they encountered. This allowed participants to discuss and reflect on when and why they changed directions in terms of research questions, methods, data and tools.
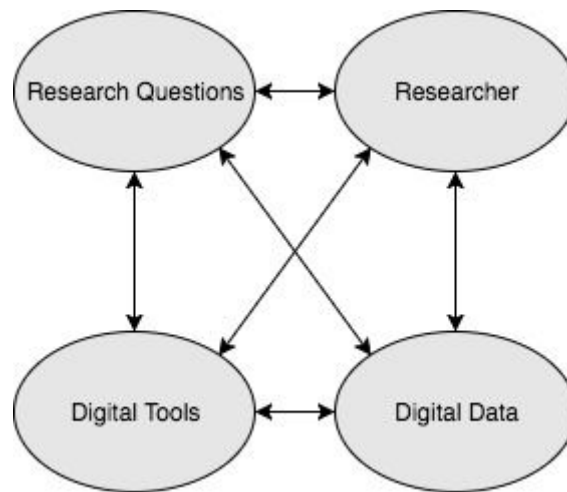
Figure 2. The interdependent concepts of Digital Tool Criticism as presented to the workshop participants.

We then asked groups to prepare a *poster* that incorporated their post-it notes into a coherent set of findings, and present this to the rest of the participants (Figure 3). The workshop closed with a general discussion on digital tool criticism, the format of the workshop and plans for ways to develop digital tool criticism into a usable instrument for Digital Humanities research.

2. Results of the workshop

In this paper, we will present our analysis of the collaborative notes and our own notes of the closing discussion, which resulted in both a model for digital tool criticism and a list of recommendations for tool users as well as tool builders. One of the findings is that collaborative note taking and reflection is an effective way to make scholars more aware of data and tool limitations, but more importantly of their own research process and the questions, considerations and choices they have. In that sense, the format of the workshop was a success.

We also analysed the process of adapting questions, data selections and tools that can be traced in the assignment notes of the six groups, which reveals six different routes through the exploratory phase, but all are iterative and non-linear, and show how assumptions are constantly challenged by limitations of tools and data, and how simple experiments are used to test hypotheses and change directions.
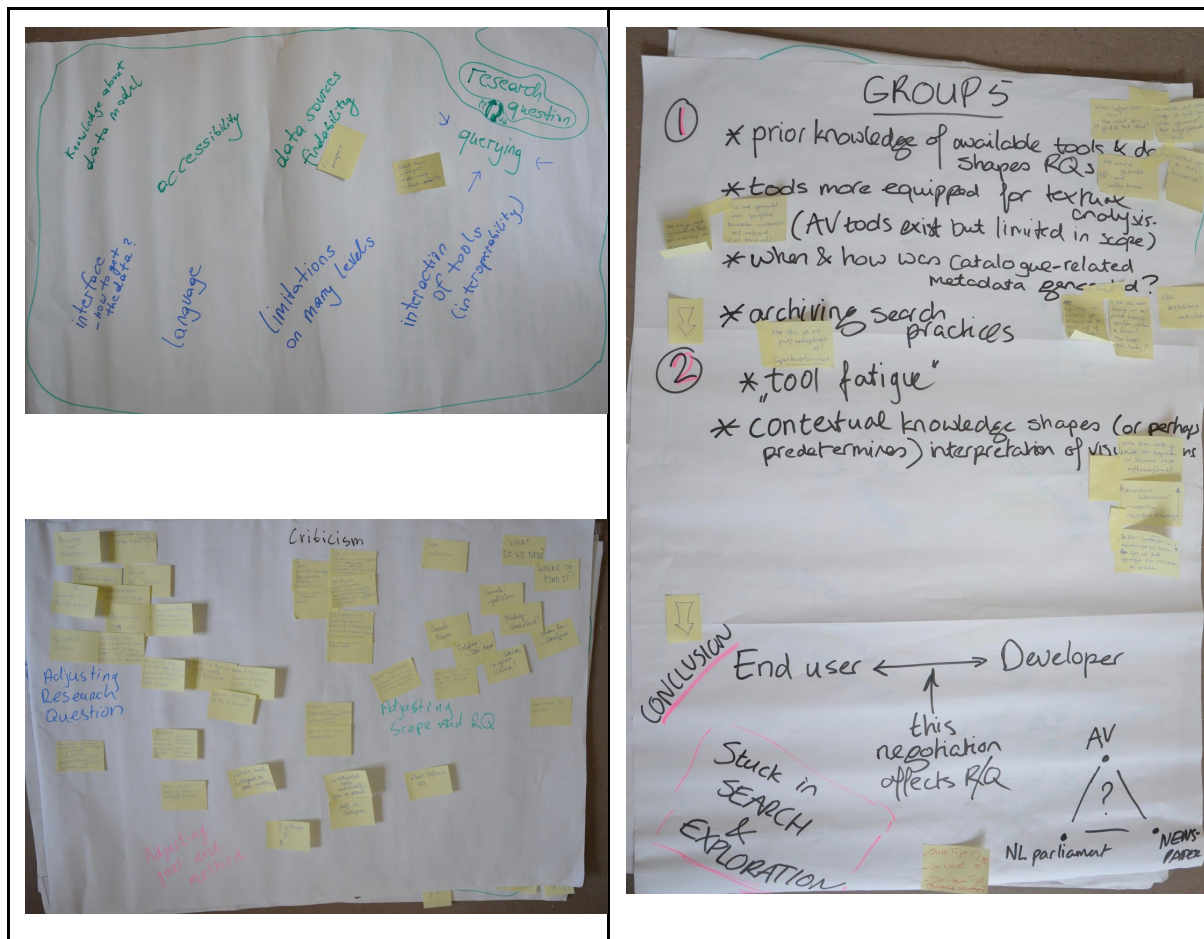
Figure 3. Spoils of the workshop: some of the posters created and presented by the participants

3. Next steps: towards a protocol for Digital Tool Criticism

Based on our analysis, we designed a new model for Digital Tool Criticism (Figure 4) that places reflection at the center of digital tool criticism, as a practice that integrates all elements of research to critically assess and use digital tools. Research questions, methods, tools and data are interdependent and choices regarding them are shaped in an interactive and reflective research process. Adopting this type of reflection in research practice has consequences for how we conduct and organize our work. The model can be used for further work on checklists and protocols for Digital Tool Criticism.

We consider the workshop as an effective and repeatable format to further develop digital tool criticism as an integrated method in digital humanities research. Moreover, we are planning to organise a follow-up workshop at DH Benelux 2018 (cf. workshop proposal) to optimize the workshop format and to take a next step towards the establishment of a protocol for Digital Tool Criticism.
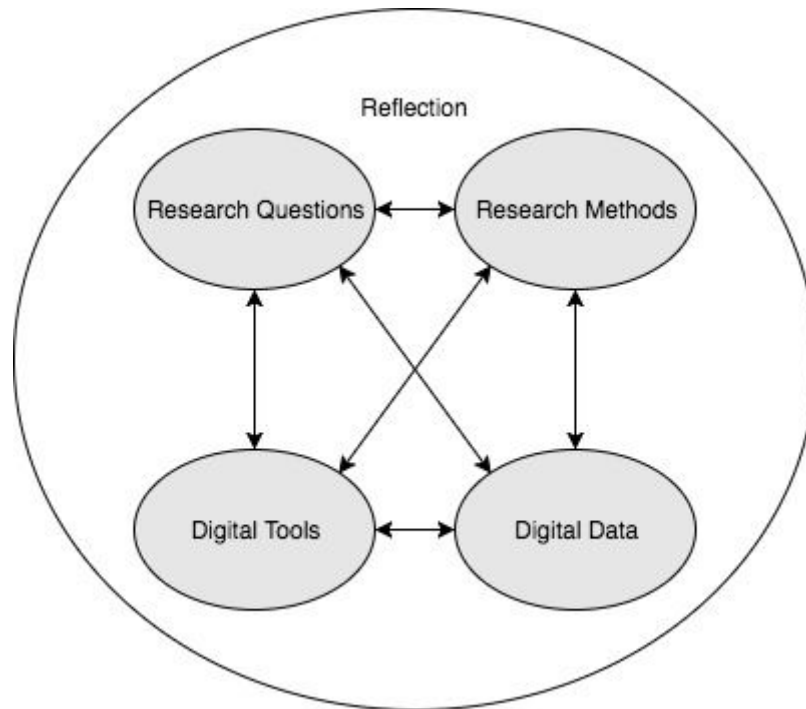
Figure 4. Our model for digital tool criticism for the exploratory phase of DH research: making 'reflection' the core activity.

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