On Digital Scholarship

written by Jeremy Huggett | 09/09/2019



I recently published a paper, 'Resilient Scholarship in the Digital Age', which looked at the tensions between digital practice and academic labour (Huggett 2019). My focus was on the nature of academic experience within the modern university and the way in which the professional and personal life of the university academic is influenced by the digital technologies which enable and support the neoliberal commodification and commercialisation of universities (at least in the UK, North America and Australasia). It was a difficult paper to write, not least because of a strong personal interest and involvement, but also because of the way it ranged across digital sociology, the sociality of labour, resilience theory, management theory, feminist and Marxist theory, and so on, most of which was entirely new to me.

The referees were very positive in their comments (thankfully!), but one particular observation they made was that in focussing on university academia, I overlooked the implications for archaeological scholarship more widely, given that much of it occurs within the realms of Cultural Resource Management and related contract work, within governmental departments and non-governmental agencies, as well as within community initiatives. This is certainly true, as is underlined in the periodic surveys of archaeological employment in the UK (e.g. Aitchison 2019). However, in my response to the editors I argued that this was too broad a definition of scholarship for the scope of this particular paper, and, perhaps more importantly, would require a level of knowledge about the scholarly experience outside the university environment that I simply didn't have – it's some 30 years since I worked in contract archaeology, for example. Other people are better qualified than I to discuss scholarship in these working contexts.

But that started me thinking. Was I somehow suggesting that the scholarly experience within and without academia were significantly different and in the process reinforcing the stereotypical view of the university academic in their ivory tower? After all, weren't some of the key characteristics of the neoliberal university that I was resisting – the commercialisation, commoditisation, the business drive and pursuit of profit by university managers, and the transformation from educational institution to service industry – imported from outside? Is the lived experience of work within the modern university so significantly different to that of the wider world beyond the university gates?

In fact, the more I think about it, the more they have in common (although I remain of the view that others are better qualified to comment in this regard). For example, the same issues of digitally supported surveillance, audit and metrics, administration, and workload management surely apply across the board, even if they are implemented in different ways. Audit along the lines of the

Research Excellence Framework or the Teaching Excellence Framework may be a peculiarly academic characteristic (p107), but metrics-based management practices were imported into universities from the business world in the first place so it might reasonably be expected that archaeologists in the larger commercial units and (non-)governmental agencies will experience their own variants of metrification and performance monitoring. Similarly, the administrative computer systems introduced within universities (p107-8) have their origins in commercial business systems for resource management and hence some variant of them are likely to be encountered in all but the smallest archaeological organisations, making the experience of systems that paradoxically increase rather than reduce workload an all too common one. Digital technologies have also led to an intensification and extensification of work (p108-9) – we can be 'always on' through our attachment to networked technologies ranging from information retrieval through the web, office tools and storage via the cloud, along with email, Twitter and other forms of social media.

Indeed, the personal implications of digital scholarship are perhaps the most obviously shared between academia and the wider archaeological community (p109ff). In particular, a characteristic of all professional archaeologists regardless of their workplace is a love of the subject and the building of personal reputation and networks. That said, like academic work more generally (p110), the pleasures of archaeological work may be somewhat mythical and hence overstated in the face of the realities of its often physical, repetitious nature, associated with relatively low pay and job insecurity. The clearer definition of working hours in the commercial context perhaps makes it somewhat easier to draw a distinction between core work hours and home/leisure time than it is for academics without formally contracted hours, but conversely, it may make it more likely for some reputationally-related work such as writing research papers to be undertaken in non-core time as they may not be seen as having any clear commercial benefit. On the other hand, report-writing may be clearly scheduled within contracted work hours, unlike in academia. The risks associated with social media (p109-10) apply across the board although whereas academics are increasingly expected to engage in such 'sociable scholarship', albeit with only limited recognition, much public engagement in commercial organisations is more clearly defined, even linked with specific roles and responsibilities. Of course, many professionals tweet in their private capacities, but is the nature of their blogging different, for example – more associated with reporting lab and field projects than debating research questions, for instance? I don't know, but it seems to me that questions of precarity, gendered inequalities, the always-on culture, and burnout (p112) apply equally to archaeological workplaces beyond the university and are similarly facilitated by digital practices.

The search for personal and community resilience, and the rejection of business-dominated resilience approaches which place the burden of responsibility on the individual and apply sticking-plaster approaches without addressing the underlying problems (p113ff), seems equally relevant to the broader archaeological workplace. A form of 'affirmative disruption' which addresses the human-level challenges introduced by the philosophies and practices of digital technologies (p114), is something that is necessary for everyone to aspire to, regardless of how resilient they may currently feel. I remain convinced, however, that an archaeological perspective from beyond the university is something that I cannot presume to provide. Someone else, as embedded in the commercial/governmental side of archaeology as I am on the university side, needs to step forward and join the debate.

References

Aitchison, K. 2019. *State of the Archaeological Market 2018: Archaeological Market Survey 2017-18*. London: Landward Research. Available at https://www.archaeologists.net/profession/profiling.

Huggett, J. 2019. 'Resilient Scholarship in the Digital Age', *Journal of Computer Applications in Archaeology* 2(1), 105–119. https://doi.org/10.5334/jcaa.25