

EVOLVING AS A DIGITAL SCHOLAR

TEACHING AND RESEARCHING
IN A DIGITAL WORLD

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LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

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*Wim Van Petegem,
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Foreword

Why this book?

With a title like ‘Evolving as a Digital Scholar’ one could wonder why we are writing a book about this topic. Shouldn’t we better go for a digital publication, somewhere on the web, quicker to adapt to new evolutions in the field, and easier to access for readers across the globe? Well, apparently there is a need for a more tangible artefact in book format (on top of electronic resources) that people can use as a reference when they have heard us, the authors, speaking about digital scholarship in our workshops. That’s indeed what we have experienced in the last decade after having been involved in frequent workshops, both in our own institutions and elsewhere. Participants (mostly scholars, and by now ‘digital’ scholars) expect to return to their daily academic life with a manual or handbook (either on paper or in an e-book format) where the principles of what has been explained and practised in the workshop is written down in such a way that they can refer back to it later whenever there is a reason for (as a rehearsal, as inspiration, as food for thought, as basis for their own workshops, etc.).

As instructors in those training sessions, and as digital scholars ourselves, we build our professional learning offerings on the existing knowledge base (and our own experiences, of course). To the best of our knowledge however this is a unique book, although some other authors address similar topics and come close to ours. Their work is of a sometimes more conceptual, theoretical nature, while this book is still evidence-based, though more a hands-on, practical book. Others deal with particular aspects of academic life, like teaching or researching, while we are addressing all roles of an academic or, better, a scholar (who is not just a teacher or a researcher). Some other books focus on certain digital technologies, like social media or web services, while we go broader in digital technologies, covering not only audio-visual media, multimedia and social media, but also webtools, apps, devices, infrastructure, etc. Sometimes one can find books examining the relation between digital technology and the academic world, on the level of higher education in general and the institution as an organisation, while our focus is more on the individual scholar (working in higher education). In sum we believe that this book clearly sheds a unique light on what could

be understood as digital scholarship and how one can evolve as a digital scholar in all its aspects.

Where does this book come from?

As already indicated, this book draws on our experiences in many workshops we have been involved in, as individual instructors/academic developers but also as a team, which has brought a more global perspective into those workshops and courses, and hence this book is written together. It is worthwhile mentioning here that there are mainly two distinct initiatives that form the basis of this book. On the one hand, there is the *AVLM-training*. AVLM stands for Audio-visual Learning Materials, since the original focus of the training was on the production of audio-visual learning materials. Later on, the scope has enlarged, and the title and acronym no longer corresponded with the content of the training, but it is known under this name and we keep it as such. This training was funded by VLIR-UOS.¹ It is an intensive eight-week programme in Flanders (Belgium) that enhances the skills and competences of academic and educational support staff of institutions in the South in the field of new educational technologies. More than 10 editions with each time between 12 and 18 participants from all continents in the South have been organised at KU Leuven since early 2000. The second series of workshops we build upon is *The Digital Scholar* course. This is a one-week professional learning opportunity in the ADA² (African Doctoral Academy) at Stellenbosch University. Since 2017, this workshop has been organised twice a year for groups of between 8 and 15 participants, and since the COVID-19 pandemic, also in a virtual format. Other learning opportunities offered by us in different countries further enrich the book and add to its intercultural flavour.

It was during the first visit to Stellenbosch University in 2014 by one of the authors, Wim Van Petegem, that the idea popped up to work on something together, an article, a massive open online course (MOOC), or maybe something totally different. It all came to us quite unexpectedly in the end. Sometime later, at the occasion of a reciprocal exchange of another author, JP Bosman, to KU Leuven, we were sitting together trying to design a course that incorporates digital technologies into the world of the higher education practitioner. It was towards the end of the staff mobility exchange, and we were getting worried that our time together was running out. We intuitively knew what we wanted to do as experienced digitally fluent practitioners, but the why, what and how were still evading us. Sitting across our desks we were

talking in circles, until we started making notes and drawing pictures on the desk pad on the table between us. “JP, what we need is a framework!” The notes and ideas started flowing and then, suddenly, the puzzle pieces started making sense. It was quite a euphoric feeling when a meaningful structure emerged which became the core idea for the later *The Digital Scholar* course. That is how this book was born!

From the first idea for a book to finally publishing this first edition was a long but rewarding journey. With four authors from two universities, we were lucky to have collaborated before in the workshops. That gave us enough common background on the contents we wanted to cover in this book, but also, and above all, the trust we needed to work together as a team of authors. We decided from the beginning that each of us would take full responsibility for two chapters in the book, and we would allow a personal touch in these chapters, so no final editing was intended to streamline the style or approach taken by the individual authors in their chapters. However, we discussed in several (virtual and face-to-face) meetings draft versions of our chapters, as critical friends. In iterative rounds we have read the work by the others, in order to adhere to the chosen common structure, to make the book comprehensive and avoid overlap, and to align our own personal writing style as much as possible to a spontaneously created team’s writing style. All this has led to the book you now have in your hands or are reading on your screen.

What to expect in this book?

This manual explains how digitally agile scholars can comfortably navigate the digital world of today and tomorrow. It foregrounds three key domains of digital agility: getting involved in research, education and (community) service, mobilising (digital) skills on various levels, and acting in multiple roles, both individually and interlinked with others.

After an introduction that outlines the foundations of this three-dimensional framework, the chapters focus on different roles and skills associated with evolving as a digital scholar. There is the author, who writes highly specialised texts for expert peers; the storyteller, who crafts accessible narratives for a broader audience in the form of blogs or podcasts; the creator, who uses graphics, audio, and video to motivate audiences to delve deeper into the material; the integrator, who develops and curates multimedia artefacts, disseminating them through channels such as websites, webinars, and open source repositories; and finally the networker, who actively triggers

interaction via social media applications and online learning communities. Additionally, the final chapters offer a blueprint for the future digital scholar as a professional learner and as a “change agent” who is open to and actively pursues innovation.

This book is a guide for those willing to enhance their digital academic profile. It equips a broad readership with the skills and the mindset to harness new digital developments and navigate the ever-evolving digital age. It gives them some fundamentals to build upon, some pointers and indicators to move forward, and some critical insights to reflect on. In other words, this handbook gives the readers answers to how they can evolve as digital scholars.

The emphasis of the book will be on higher education, and most of the book will concentrate on the specific academic context. Nevertheless, we argue that many more people could recognise themselves in what we present. We think of people involved in all kinds of teaching (like academic developers, trainers, instructors, coaches); people working in research institutions; those interested in thinking about their own work in terms of action research; or people with a mission in the (digital) society of today. Although our examples and good practices will mainly come from the academic world, we hope to inspire and get inspired by digital scholars outside academia.

This book aims to be a handbook, i.e., in between a purely scientific and a merely popularising book. We describe the scientific basis, of course, in the style of a decent academic publication, but we do not overload the book with typical research-oriented references and footnotes. We hope you can appreciate our efforts to balance between a truly academic and a more informal, colloquial approach. When we sometimes tend to lean a little more to one side, that simply reflects how we live and work as individual digital scholars in diverse settings, flexible enough to adapt quickly and always professional to practise what we preach. We therefore start from our personal experiences in our own academic lives. We try to explain and illustrate the topics in a practical way so that a large variety of readers with different backgrounds and levels of knowledge find them interesting and handy, full of inspiring insights and examples to apply into their own practice and evolution as digital scholars. And by the way: isn't ‘a digital scholar’ someone who intrinsically mixes theory (scholar) and practice (digital)? Think about it!

How to read this book?

In the first chapter of the book a framework will be offered that describes an evolving digital scholar along three dimensions, one of which is chosen to structure the rest of the book. Indeed, we will tackle the different roles a digital scholar can play one by one and devote a separate chapter to each of them. It would be a good idea to read these chapters in the same order as they are presented in the book. Such a linear walkthrough lets the reader/practitioner gradually evolve as digital scholar: it does not only give the reader an insight into the different roles he or she can take on, but it also clarifies how these roles differ and are building upon each other at the same time, relating them to the overall framework.

On the other hand, for the more advanced or, should we say, the more adventurous reader, it is also perfectly possible to choose the chapter of your interest and start from there. As said, the authors worked in a team, but wrote their chapters independently and therefore the chapters have a stand-alone character as well. So, if you are an experienced digital scholar wanting to evolve further, or if you simply want to reread some parts, or if you just want to browse freely through the contents of this book, you can. We help the reader to make a proper selection of a chapter to read by listing briefly what will be tackled at the beginning of each chapter. In this case it is however recommended to start with the first chapter at least, in order to have the framework in mind when later jumping around through the rest of the book.

And for all readers, we invite you to become our critical friends. It is a characteristic of an evolving digital scholar that you constantly reflect upon your own behaviour in the digital world, and that implies that you are critical about what you see, hear, feel, learn and... read. We welcome all constructive comments to improve this book and yes, we intend to update it whenever the time calls for it. New versions (especially of the e-book) will become readily available as soon as there is a need. Please, always check whether you are reading the most recent version.

To all evolving digital scholars, happy reading and practising!