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Doing a Lot with a Little: Making Digital Humanities Work at a Small College

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Doing a Lot with a Little: Making Digital Humanities Work at a Small College

Abstract

I'm interested in how one goes about integrating digital tools into the liberal arts, and my perspective is that of a long-time faculty member in a small department at a small school. The common wisdom is that today's students know and can do more than most faculty in all things digital, and we need merely provide opportunities for them to use those skills. But that's not true for many students. Our department's newest faculty member has a specialty in digital media, specifically gamification. And although many students are flocking to her classes, she's also encountering resistance from some English majors: as one said to her in the first week of her "Digital Literacies" class, "I don't know anything about games, and I didn't become an English major to analyze stuff like this." I see two issues revealed through her statement: first, not all students are as digitally savvy as we think they are. Yes, they are experts at Facebook and Instagram and they can upload a movie from their iPhone to YouTube in seconds. However, they tend not to apply the digital skills they do have to their academic studies, and they usually don't have the confidence or intellectual curiosity to explore the application of new digital tools on their own. And second, this student and others like her hadn't received exposure in earlier classes to digital humanities techniques, so what my colleague was doing seemed outlandish to her. I want to address both issues today.

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Comments

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Doing a Lot with a Little: Making Digital Humanities Work at a Small College

I'm interested in how one goes about integrating digital tools into the liberal arts, and my perspective is that of a long-time faculty member in a small department at a small school. The common wisdom is that today's students know and can do more than most faculty in all things digital, and we need merely provide opportunities for them to use those skills. But that's not true for many students. Our department's newest faculty member has a specialty in digital media, specifically gamification. And although many students are flocking to her classes, she's also encountering resistance from some English majors: as one said to her in the first week of her "Digital Literacies" class, "I don't know anything about games, and I didn't become an English major to analyze stuff like this." I see two issues revealed through her statement: first, not all students are as digitally savvy as we think they are. Yes, they are experts at Facebook and Instagram and they can upload a movie from their iPhone to Youtube in seconds. However, they tend not to apply the digital skills they do have to their academic studies, and they usually don't have the confidence or intellectual curiosity to explore the application of new digital tools on their own. And second, this student and others like her hadn't received exposure in earlier classes to digital humanities techniques, so what my colleague was doing seemed outlandish to her. I want to address both issues today.

In our department, students can take multiple courses from my new colleague and gain expertise in digital media. But is that the right strategy? Most of us would not be satisfied if only one faculty member taught research skills, or theoretical approaches, or grammar. The analogy is imperfect: most of us on the English faculty have a high level of expertise in these areas while our digital expertise varies widely. English departments are filled with a mixture of dinosaurs and newbies and everything in between. We aren't all equipped to use the same digital tools, nor do we want to. It makes the most sense for faculty members to use the tools that are complementary to what they do. Like everything else we teach, digital skills are best taught by integrating them widely and reinforcing them often. Wider exposure

to digital tools, wider than what expert colleagues can provide, will help increase students' receptivity to these new approaches.

But even after we subscribe to that principle, there's a second problem. At small schools, resources for full commitment to digital methods are scarce. For example, at St. John Fisher College, English is near the bottom of the list for use of computer labs--even after a conversation with the dean or provost about how humanities majors need such spaces as much as communication, business, and computer science majors do, faculty in my department who request labs sometimes do not get assigned to them. This situation will likely improve over time as colleges devote more institutional resources to increasing the number of computer labs, but until it does, it's actually an incentive for a broad and multi-level approach to digital humanities work. Not all digital work requires a computer lab or special software, so while our access is limited, why not use a wide range of tools beyond those specialized applications?

Personally, I would place myself on the dinosaur end of the digital spectrum. But interviews last year with the candidates for the digital media position intrigued me, so over the summer, I did some research into digital humanities and found interesting and useful ways to incorporate some tools into my classroom. Another impetus was discovering that our library holds a set of diaries written by Frances DeWitt Babcock (a Rochester, New York, singer and piano teacher) from 1912, when she was 15 years old, to 1970 when she was 63. I teach History of English, and I always include a unit on Present Day English, slang, dialects, etc. So these diaries are a great primary source. She isn't famous, and her entries are not particularly reflective or interesting as a historical record, but her diaries work well for me as a linguistic corpus.

Rather than a one-time use of the diaries in class, I thought it would be more valuable to digitize this resource so the students could make it available to the public while also using the diaries for their own research papers. One digital resource that worked well for me was Omeka, which bills itself as "a free, flexible, and open source web-publishing platform for the display of library, museum, archives, and scholarly collections and exhibitions" (omeka.org). The students are able to publish both transcripts and

images of the diary entries they choose for their projects, and even their final papers explaining their findings, if they desired to make the latter public.

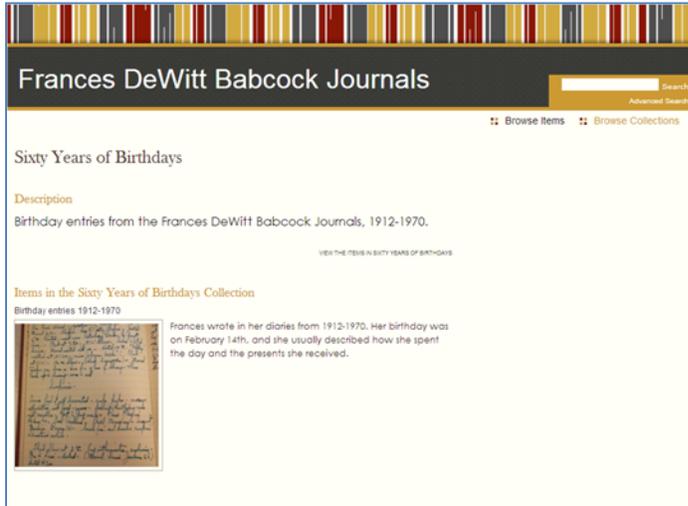


Figure 1: Example of Omeka website as host for Frances DeWitt Babcock Journals

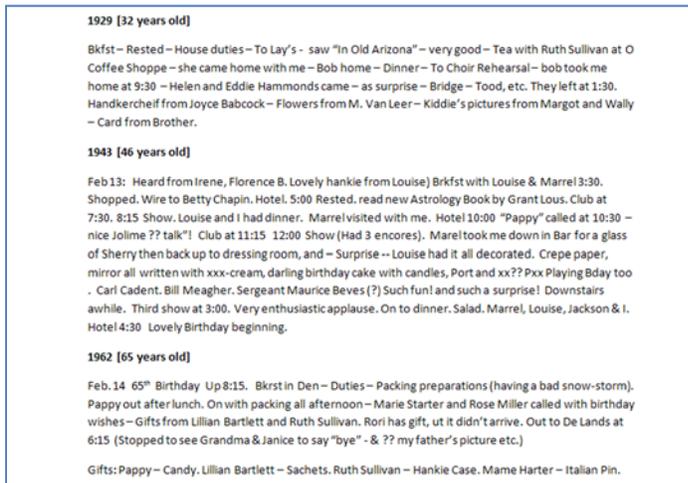


Figure 2: Transcripts of three birthday entries from the diaries, posted on Omeka

A great example of how students can use archival material digitally is Ohio University's digitization of the 1873 senior-year diary of Maggie Boyd, its first female graduate; students tweeted excerpts from this diary (<https://storify.com/alddenlibrary/maggiemoysd1873>) for a year, with entries matching the date of the posting (e.g. January 1, 1873 posted on January 1, 2012.)

A second resource that works well for History of English is Google's Ngram Viewer. This website allows any user to search, according to the Ngram's creators, "over 8,116,746 books, or over 6% of all books ever published" (Lin et al. 170). In the past, this project has always required students to use the Oxford English Dictionary to provide information about a group of words' histories, but this time I asked the students to use Ngram Viewer to access different kinds of information about the words they choose to research. Using this site, they are able to create graphs showing, for example, how the various slang terms Frances Babcock uses compare to wider contemporary usage. In her teenage years, she has several ways of saying "lots of fun," including "packs of fun" and "stacks of fun." Ngram lets students graph these phrases' frequency of use relative to each other in its corpus and also provides links to quotations using the word or phrase from its digitized books. Frances Babcock's use of "packs of fun" in 1915, for example, correlates to the same phrase in a Bobbsey Twins book published in 1919.



Figure 3: Google Ngram-generated graph showing usage of "packs of fun" within its corpus

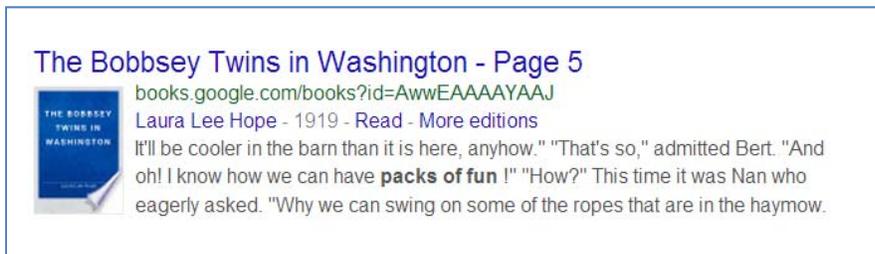


Figure 4: Quotation excerpt provided by link on Google Ngram.

A simple “create-your-own-website” program like Wix.com allows students to post transcripts of the diaries along with links to Ngrams they’ve created, showing the results of their research on wider use of those slang or dialect terms.



Figure 5: Wix.com website with highlighted phrase in diary entry (a link to an Ngram)

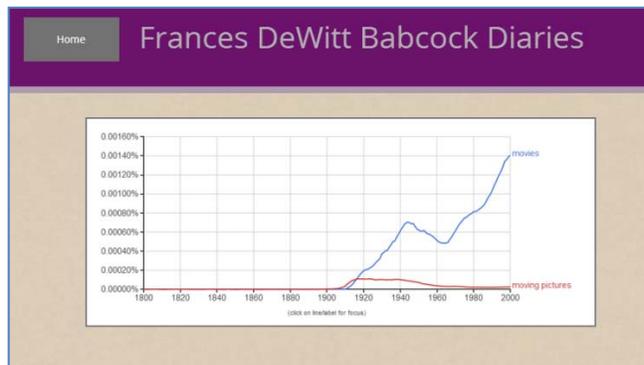
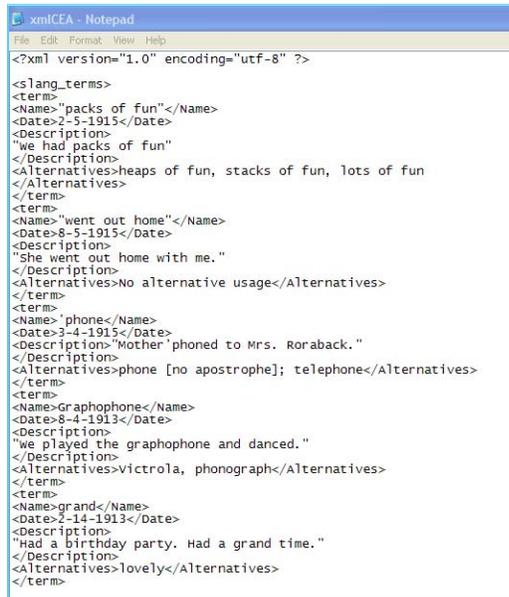


Figure 6: Ngram graph for “movies vs. moving pictures,” linked from entry in Figure 5

The most challenging project for my class was basic coding in XML. This isn’t a skill I ask students to use directly for a wider project in the course; however, because tagging text is the basic building block for HTML and for TEI, the coding language developed specifically for literature, I thought it was worth taking class time to have students try it so that they get a sense of what is involved with texts they access

online. This is the closest analogy to what I said earlier: I taught some basic “grammar,” and students can then learn to use “grammar” stylistically or rhetorically—i.e., more advanced coding—in an upper-level class.



```
<?xml version="1.0" encoding="utf-8" ?>
<slang_terms>
<term>
<Name>"packs of fun"</Name>
<Date>2-5-1915</Date>
<Description>
"we had packs of fun"
</Description>
<Alternatives>heaps of fun, stacks of fun, lots of fun
</Alternatives>
</term>
<term>
<Name>"went out home"</Name>
<Date>8-5-1915</Date>
<Description>
"She went out home with me."
</Description>
<Alternatives>No alternative usage</Alternatives>
</term>
<term>
<Name>'phone</Name>
<Date>3-4-1915</Date>
<Description>"Mother 'phoned to Mrs. Roraback."
</Description>
<Alternatives>phone [no apostrophe]; telephone</Alternatives>
</term>
<term>
<Name>graphophone</Name>
<Date>8-4-1913</Date>
<Description>
"we played the graphophone and danced."
</Description>
<Alternatives>victrola, phonograph</Alternatives>
</term>
<term>
<Name>grand</Name>
<Date>2-14-1913</Date>
<Description>
"Had a birthday party. Had a grand time."
</Description>
<Alternatives>lovely</Alternatives>
</term>
```

Figure 7: xml coding example of slang phrases from Frances DeWitt Babcock diaries

I’ll be using Omeka again in the capstone course I’ll be teaching in the fall, when the students will be doing literary analysis using archived material, as well as another tool that didn’t fit into History of English but will be useful in the capstone: Zotero, a tool that lets a group of any size create a group bibliography (and which provides citations for any source included in the bibliography). And if my students over time digitize more and more of the diaries, the entries would also be useful for other classes. Perhaps a Women and Gender Studies class could use GIS mapping, a tool for tagging locations on maps, to analyze the locations in Rochester and Buffalo that Frances DeWitt frequented; if my students were to tag references to all the books, films, popular songs, and restaurants DeWitt mentions in her diaries, an American Studies class might use that material for a cultural studies project.

Some digital experts would call these examples trivial use of the tools. And traditionalists would say that every day I spend on coding is one less day I spend teaching Middle English or Early Modern

English in History of English. These two attitudes are represented in nearly every public discussion of digital liberal arts on the internet. But many people take a centrist position, as I do. On the issue of “dabbling” in the digital, I really like how Ted Underwood puts it in his blog post titled “How everyone gets to say they do DH”:

What makes this tricky is that DH—unlike some other theoretical movements—does have a strong practical dimension. And that tends to harden boundaries. It makes grad students (and senior faculty) feel that no amount of information about DH will ever be useful to them. “If I don’t have time to build a web page from scratch, I’m never going to count as a digital humanist, so why should I go to reading groups or surf blogs?”

Naturally, I do want to encourage people to pick up some technical skills. They’re fun.

But I think it’s also really important for the health of the field that DH should develop the same sort of penumbra of affiliation that every other scholarly movement has developed.

It needs to be possible to intelligently shoot the breeze about DH even if you don’t “do” it. . . . Bottom line: Grad students [and faculty] shouldn’t feel that they’re being asked to assume a position as “digital” or “analog” humanists, any more than they’re being asked to declare themselves “for” or “against” close reading and feminism. DH is not an identity category; it’s a project that your work might engage, indirectly, in a variety of ways. (tedunderwood.com)

And as for the “giving up content” problem, it is my responsibility to give students a varied toolbag to analyze how language works as much as it is to familiarize them with Middle English. It doesn’t matter so much what these tools are as much as it matters that the students can explain what they are and how they fulfill a purpose. The slang research that the students did with Ngram I usually do through an assignment with the online OED. The larger point of the assignment is not that they know and remember the histories of a few words but that they become familiar with the OED and see how what the OED offers helps us understand language. Using a variety of methods in their undergraduate English careers will help accustom them to an attitude of openness to ways of exploring language. In a recent article by New York

Times contributor Thomas Friedman about what kind of people Google hires, the senior VP of people operations said, “The No. 1 thing we look for is general cognitive ability, and it’s not I.Q. It’s learning ability. It’s the ability to process on the fly. It’s the ability to pull together disparate bits of information.” Friedman adds, “The least important attribute they look for is “expertise.” Instead they want someone “who has high cognitive ability, is innately curious, willing to learn and has emergent leadership skills.” Cognitive ability, intellectual curiosity, willingness to learn: these are the characteristics we claim are taught by a liberal arts education, and the use of digital tools, an addition to the array of methods by which students examine, organize, and analyze texts, can be one way to show those characteristics. The tools I use are elementary and will not in themselves land students a job or a spot in a graduate program. However, I think their intellectual curiosity will be stimulated if they encounter a wide variety of ways of “doing” English and if in their own work they have to pick and choose among analytical approaches that they have learned.

It’s also our job to help students understand the relationship of these tools to scholarship, including traditional scholarship, as well as how the tools reflect a way of thinking about knowledge itself—that is, how a tool reflects one way among a myriad of others of thinking about the world. And thinking about the relationship of those ways of understanding to each other is truly what an education in the liberal arts is all about. Back to the grumpy student—I would hope that if she had taken my class before she took my colleague’s class, she would have had a less narrow definition of what it means to do work in the discipline of English, and she would have seen the new material as an opportunity, not an obstacle.

St. John Fisher College

[Note: This paper is a slightly edited version of a presentation at the College English Association Conference in March 2014.]

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Web Resources Mentioned:

GIS mapping (www.tableausoftware.com)

Records locations on maps for analysis

Google Ngram viewer: (books.google.com/ngrams)

A searchable archive of millions of digitized books from 1800 to the present

Omeka (omeka.org)

An easy-to-use website for showcasing art, photographs, and archival document collections

TEI coding (www.teibyexample.org)

A more advanced coding system than xml; tutorials available on this site

Wix website (wix.com)

A click-and-drag personal website; easy to incorporate documents, images, and links

xml coding tutorials (www.w3schools.com)

Provides tutorials for creating xml code

Zotero (www.zotero.org)

A digital bibliography tool, useful for groups