Using Omeka and Neatline to Facilitate Student Research in a Core Literature Class

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COURSE GOALS FOR ENGH 202-004 (Spring 2015)
“AMERICAN WOMEN’S BESTSELLERS: DIGITAL HUMANITIES PERSPECTIVES”

• Give students the chance to practice skills of close reading, analysis, and synthesis in a writing/historical context different from that of the familiar “English paper.”
• Provide a writing/historical structure that facilitates making connections between the core texts of the class and contemporary historical documents.
• Highlight a key focus of the class -- the cultural significance of places and spaces, real and fictional, in the core texts under study-- through the use of digital mapping tools.
• Introduce students to some digital humanities tools, and the ways they can be used to visually represent literary texts and their cultural/historical contexts.
• Give students a preliminary taste of one form of original research performed by literary scholars.
• Give the instructor a chance to experiment with the possibilities, pedagogical and otherwise, of the Omeka/Neatline platform.

ASSIGNMENTS & ACTIVITIES

• After reading and discussing each of the four core texts, students brainstormed a list of important places and spaces in the text, and identified larger areas and subareas into which those space/places could be grouped. Students then signed up for area/subarea groups according to their interests, and decided which members of the group would work on specific spaces/places.
• Each student located at least one primary document relevant to his/her chosen space or place, and, following the directions on the item assignment worksheet, created an Omeka item based on the document.
• Groups worked together to fill out an Omeka worksheet for their assigned area, writing synthetic area and subarea introductions, adding quotations from core texts to individual items, and determining where dots representing items, subareas, and areas should be placed. The instructor created the exhibits following these directions. Groups then presented their draft exhibits to the class, then had an opportunity to revise before final grading.
• Final exam questions drew on the Omeka/Neatline items and exhibits, asking students to incorporate references to specific items and exhibits into essays analyzing particular aspects of at least two of the core texts studied.

RESULTS & REFLECTION

Successes:

• Most students were able to locate appropriate primary documents with only moderate difficulty in understanding the concept and/or figuring out appropriate search strategies. Many were excited at the documents they found, and the connections they were able to make with specific aspects of the novels under study.

• The assignment sequence scaffolded the process of locating and analyzing individual pieces of evidence, then drawing broader conclusions by identifying the patterns that emerge when individual pieces of evidence are examined as part of a larger group.

• Mapping spaces and places from the novels not only illuminated the significance of those locations in the novels and the cultures from which they arise, but also revealed the engagement of these “domestic” fictions with larger geopolitical events.

• Both item and exhibit assignments and the final exam encouraged original thought and encouraged attempts to find pre-existing answers on the internet or elsewhere.

Issues & Considerations:

• While students were able to explain factual connections between primary documents and literary texts, and to summarize the contents of both, they sometimes overgeneralized from limited evidence. In addition, many had difficulty moving beyond factual statements to analysis and synthesis that engaged texts and contexts at a deeper symbolic/thematic level.

• Due to time constraints, students did not place dots on the maps (and didn’t for the most part provide detailed instructions for doing so). Making these decisions involves critical thinking about texts and how to represent them digitally; it would be worthwhile to have students participate more actively in the process.

• Items in a public Omeka/Neatline site must include, at the very least, accurate source and rights information; ensuring this level of correctness in the work of a 40-student class can consume significant time both inside and outside class.

• Students in a core literature class may be resistant to trying something new in what is, for many of them, the last English class they expect to take. Resistance may manifest as doing the minimum possible amount of work, increasing the need for corrections and revisions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the Term Faculty Development Fund, which provided funding for the development of the first iteration of this class in Spring 2014, and to my ENGH 202 students in both Spring ’14 and Spring ’15, who provided invaluable feedback on course materials in development.