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Building Cross-Campus Collaborations Around Digital Pedagogy

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Collaborations between instructors and archivists on digital pedagogy and design are useful, but how do we actually build and manage these partnerships? Collaboration in the digital humanities invites students to interact with new sources, connects different units on campus with complementary skill sets, and provides

supports for projects to be completed in teams and larger classes.

This monograph discusses the reasons why collaborations are important from the perspectives of two members involved in collaborative digital pedagogy: one from the perspective of a course instructor and the other from the perspective an archivist. The monograph examines the meaning of collaboration more broadly and what it might mean to build impactful, and lasting, partnerships around digital pedagogy. We reflect on our experiences jointly designing a capstone project for a third-year digital humanities course that sought to introduce students to both digital editing and working with primary sources.

Collaborations around digital pedagogy are becoming increasingly common as libraries and archives become more



closely connected to teaching, learning, and course design.¹ It is widely recognized that collaborations between archivists, librarians, and instructors can complement one another's skills and help to integrate new knowledges into course design. The goal and outcome of many of these collaborations is to encourage and foster deeper learning in students.² Such an approach is also consistent with a student-centred approach to learning that emphasizes the development and evaluation of historical texts. This, in turn, requires a working grasp of relevant historiographical knowledge - something that, in this case, was built through a collaboration between the instructor and archivist (Sternfeld, 2012). The course instructor approached the university archives with the invitation to collaborate on course and assessment design. It was the university archives which recommended a particular collection to focus on and then worked to digitize and select the primary sources students would analyze during the course.

Why Collaborate? An Instructor's Perspective

Our collaboration centred on the creation of a third-year undergraduate experiential learning course in the digital humanities. The capstone project in the course was the completion of a web-based practicum. The goal of the

¹ Digital pedagogy includes a focus not only on the use of digital technologies for teaching. It also develops critical perspectives about the use of digital technologies themselves, and about their impact on learning. Digital Pedagogy Lab, Primer: Digital Pedagogy available at <http://www.digitalpedagogylab.com/hybridped/digitalpedagogy/> (accessed February 20, 2018).

² See Giannetti, F. (2017). *Against the grain: Reading for the challenges of collaborative digital humanities pedagogy college & undergraduate libraries*. 24.2-4, pp. 257-269. The Modern Language Association (MLA) Commons also identifies that collaboration helps position the instructor as a facilitator that supports students in learning how to work together.



practicum was to engage students in the work of digitizing primary sources while also transcribing them and providing editorial content to help the reader interpret the documents using the WordPress blogging platform. As the course instructor, my role (Dr. Mary Chaktsiris) was to design the course and assessments as well as facilitate classroom management and lecture delivery. Since it was the first time the course was taught, I approached the university archives as a possible collaborator to help identify what primary sources could be digitized, transcribed, and annotated by students. The collection would need to be able to accommodate a class of around 40 students and allow for each student to be responsible for transcribing an individual source, but within a

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team structure. As explained later in the “archivist’s perspective” section of the monograph, the archivist played a key role in identifying workable primary sources and building capacity to provide historical and local context for them.

I explored collaborations with a few units on campus that engage with work on primary sources and the digital humanities, including the university archives. In some cases, other units on campus were interested in partnering but did not have access to the primary sources that were necessary. Other units on campus might have made good collaborators but lacked the time and resources to devote to teaching and pedagogy. Often, different units on campus value different kinds of scholarly activities. An important part of collaborating, then, is putting in the time to build relationships and networks on campus that are reciprocal (Milligan, 2017).



Course Design and Collaborative Digital Pedagogy

Designing this course in collaboration with another unit on campus was important to reach the stated learning outcomes that invited students to engage in work-integrated learning and to digitize and edit primary source documents.³ From the perspective of course and assessment design, it was essential that students participate directly in the creation of scholarly research materials and transcriptions of primary source documents that would be made freely available using the WordPress platform.⁴

To complete the capstone project, students worked in teams of about eight to digitize, transcribe, and annotate historical primary sources from the Laurier Archives. From the instructor's perspective, the main responsibilities of the collaboration with the university archives was around classroom management and the design of assessment structures. Students were assessed both individually and as a team; that is to say there were both individual and group components to the course assessment structure. This was important because it eased anxiety around some of the perceived pitfalls of team work, including uneven workloads between members (Tolman and Kremlin, 2016). Scaffolding student work each week by progressively moving through the different 'stages' of creating a digital edition and web pages - with each week building on work done the week before - was also a key strategy that was used to support student learning. Individual assessment relied on individual student reflections and transcriptions, while group assessment centered around a

³ For more on the usefulness of primary sources to history education see Seixas, P. and Morton, T. (2013). *The big six historical thinking concepts*. Toronto: Nelson Education.

⁴ The final website created by students as their capstone project can be accessed [here](#).



series of blog posts, based on the individual transcriptions, that students worked on together as a team.

> Instructor Recommendations for Classroom-Archive Collaborations

- Find collaborators on campus with mandates or missions to support student learning. Look for collaborators that have access to resources (including primary sources);
- Scaffold student learning so the learning each week builds week-to-week throughout the course;
- Design team assessment structures using rubrics that include both individual and team components;
- Provide significant in-class time for students to work with collaborators (if available) and visit collaborator spaces (i.e., the archives or library);
- Acknowledge the work of collaborative partners and express one's gratitude to students in lectures, field trips, and course documents, including the syllabus.

Why collaborate? An Archivist's Perspective

The DH300 project partnership allowed the Laurier Archives to advance two significant strategic priorities: 1) create opportunities for undergraduate students to work with our primary source holdings in meaningful ways; and 2) digitize key collections and make them available online.

University archives and special collections were once the preserve of academics and 'serious scholars,' but no longer. Engaging with undergraduate students and supporting the academic mission of the university is a key strategic priority for



most university archives.⁵ Indeed, introducing new researchers to the rewards of working with original sources can be one of the best parts of the job. Working with original, primary sources is widely acknowledged to be a high-impact way to connect students to the past, to encourage them to “think historically” and to examine critically the nature of the historical record (Levesque, 2008).

Nevertheless, introducing undergraduate students to original primary documents can be challenging. Students who are let loose in the archives to conduct original research are often overwhelmed by the prospect of working with such unfamiliar sources. They may not understand the historical context for

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the documents and are often confused by the old-fashioned vocabulary and cursive handwriting. The challenge for us is: How can we design a project that will set the students up for success, and not lead to frustration and demoralization?

The answer, we’ve discovered, is to create a close working partnership with the faculty instructor and to design a scaffolded primary source assignment or research project that is well-integrated into the course. This ensures that students are supported by both the instructor and the archivists at every stage of the process. Digital editing proved to be an excellent introduction to working with primary sources because it allowed students to encounter the challenges posed by original documents on a small scale in a group setting.

At the same time, like many archives, we have an ongoing digitization project to make our collections more accessible and searchable. Digitization of analog records is extremely

⁵ For more on archives in the classroom see: Mitchell, E et al. (2012). (Eds.). *Past or portal: Enhancing undergraduate learning through special collections and archives*. Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries.



time-consuming. This is especially true for handwritten records that must be transcribed. In response, many archival repositories are turning to crowdsourcing to transcribe large collections.⁶

While the opportunity to introduce students to original historical documents and teaching them to think critically about original evidence is what gets us up in the morning, trying to imagine how we will transcribe and digitize so many handwritten documents keeps us up at night. The digital editing practicum addressed both of these priorities: It gave students an accessible introduction to the experience of working with original historical records. It also gave the Archives a set of transcribed letters to add to our digital collection.

Archives and Collaborative Digital Pedagogy

In attempting to create as authentic an experience as possible for the students, the capstone project for the course was built around an existing transcription and digitization project at the Laurier Archives. The students transcribed a collection of handwritten correspondence sent by a seminary faculty member, C.H. Little, to his mother, Candace Herman Little of Hickory North Carolina. In total, Little sent his mother over 800 letters between 1891 and 1946. The DH300 class worked on correspondence from the 1930s. Since the letters vary significantly in detail and length, staff at the Archives pre-selected letters that, we hoped, would be most interesting and accessible to students in 2017. The Archives also provided the students with some background information about C.H. Little and his time. As a result, students worked on correspondence that spoke primarily about family life, political

⁶ For example, see the New York Public Library's menu project <http://menus.nypl.org/>.



events and the university community. Letters that discussed Little's position on contemporary theological debates, for example, were not included in the project because the subject matter was deemed to be too specialized.

The transcription and annotation project provided a good introduction to the challenges of working with original historical records on a scale that was accessible to novice researchers. Students overcame the frustrations of unfamiliar handwriting and old-fashioned idioms by working collaboratively to decode the letters. In annotating the letters, the students chose intriguing references in the letters and followed up with some secondary research. They chose to learn more about such topics as: the 1936 Moose River gold mine collapse; whooping cough; and the effect of the Great

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Depression on the patriarchal family. Students used annotations to grapple with the issue of language about racial minorities that is widely considered offensive by today's standards.

At the Archives, we would have been perfectly pleased if the outcome of this collaboration was a successful class assignment centred on archival records. Being able to add completed transcriptions to our online portal made the project all the more worthwhile. After the class, Archives staff edited the transcriptions and made them available online as part of a digital collection.⁷

> Archivist Recommendations for Classroom-Archive Collaborations

- Begin early. Busy people usually need lots of lead time to work on a new project;

⁷ <http://images.ourontario.ca/Laurier/2817970/data?grd=1888>



- Keep in mind the major strategic priorities of each partner while designing the project;
- Repeat the project (by avoiding the one-off class). This will allow project partners to build on their experiences and also reap the rewards of committing a lot of up-front effort and time;
- Set students up for success by providing as much context as possible when working with historical records.

Collaboration Isn't Always Easy

More often than not, academic departments and teaching support units remain siloed from one another. Interdisciplinary and collaborative work is not always an integral part of how institutions of higher education function. Add to this siloing the possibility of differences in personality and expectations, and the road to collaboration might seem like a rocky one. However, in our experience, building a shared vision for a digital pedagogy project relies on a combination of managing personal expectations, keeping the scope of the project achievable for each collaborator, and respecting and understanding the different pressure-points in other units work flow and calendars.

Collaborative work ideally requires all members to have an equal say in how the project is completed, jointly assigning and dividing tasks, and acknowledging an equal responsibility for the outcome of the project. This can sometimes be a slow and messy process. Some might dare say also an inefficient one (McCiellan, 2016). However, as the old adage says, if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

It is important that each partner models effective collaborative behaviour such as listening and respecting one another, sharing credit, and understanding the competing priorities



within any unit. We were lucky; our collaborative relationship was initially built on mutual respect and shared interest which (later) led to friendship and trust.

Some words of advice: Before starting a large collaborative project together, try a smaller one first. If you can successfully collaborate around designing a class visit, single assessment, or workshop idea then you are setting a good foundation to collaborate on larger digital pedagogy projects in the future, such as a course redesign or capstone project.

Conclusion

Collaboration is an important component of digital pedagogy, but it is also important to acknowledge that collaborative pedagogy takes work, time, and resources. Collaboration can be ‘a big ask.’ Before a collaboration can be pursued, a relationship must be built between the instructor and possible collaborators on campus (including archivists and librarians) and vice-versa. This relationship must be reciprocal, meaning that all collaborative parties need to be willing to commit the time and resources necessary to build and sustain collaborative pedagogy partnerships, benefiting from such partnerships in ways that are meaningful to their respective units and disciplines.

In each of our sections of the monograph we have made recommendations for how collaborations around digital pedagogy can be less transactional and more meaningful, personal, and lasting for both collaborators and students.

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Discussion Questions

1. Who are some possible collaborators on campus or in your university community?



2. What kind of contributions might you be expecting from other collaborators?
3. How can you contribute to the work of those units you wish to partner with?
4. Reflecting on your unique institutional context, what might be the essential characteristics of a successful collaborative partnership that centres around digital pedagogy?