Literature 2.0: Exploration at the Intersection of Technology and the Humanities

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Abstract
Digital humanities has been described as “the work that gets done at the crossroads of digital media and traditional humanistic study, [which] happens in two different ways. On the one hand, it’s bringing the tools and techniques of digital media to bear on traditional humanistic questions. But it’s also bringing humanistic modes of inquiry to bear on digital media” (“On Scholarly Communication and the Digital Humanities: An Interview with Kathleen Fitzpatrick”, In the Library with the Lead Pipe). This paper describes my digital humanities project, Literature 2.0: Exploration at the Intersection of Technology and the Humanities, that I conducted in a first year Literature survey course, EN102, in the Spring of 2015. The project aimed to encourage widespread cadet motivation and interest through participation in various projects that called on a myriad of skills and covered a variety of disciplines. Through this interdisciplinary approach, I was able to harness a variety of interests towards a common goal of understanding literature.

Keywords
Digital humanities, interdisciplinary, new media, technology, literature, EN102, collaboration.

Introduction
Introducing the Ipad 2 in March of 2011, Steve Jobs explained his approach to innovation, arguing “technology alone is not enough—it’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing.” Jobs’s assertion resonates in the rapidly growing field of ‘digital humanities,’ in which research methodologies engage the humanities through the use of digital technologies. In defense of this new pedagogical approach, Christopher Blackwell and Thomas Martin have argued that scientists and engineers often “have an immediate and concrete effect on the larger world around them during their undergraduate years, while young students of Classics too frequently do not, and cannot, at least not without some creative thinking on the part of their instructors.” Accordingly, Literature 2.0 uses Blackwell’s and Martin’s argument as a launching point, connecting creativity, innovation, and technology to facilitate undergraduate involvement in significant humanities research that has an impact outside of the literature classroom.
My pedagogical approach aims not only to inform students about literature and its scholarship, but also to demand that they actively participate in ongoing scholarly conversations and make real, lasting contributions to the field. This approach is grounded in the theoretical work of Franco Moretti and Matthew Jockers. Moretti’s book, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (Verso, 2007), and Jockers book, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), both laid the foundation for the digital humanities. By using available technologies in the classroom, the class builds the skills necessary to participate in literary scholarship and to make new, insightful observations and arguments about the literature my students encounter. Furthermore, the intentionally interdisciplinary nature of the approach appeals to a variety of students’ academic interests which, in turn, deepens classroom discussion and leverages disparate perspectives to approach meaningful literary questions.

This project has not only already affected the 61 students involved in my sections this semester, but it also has had an impact on the learning of the 1036 students currently enrolled in EN102 and it will continue to be available for the 1000+ cadets who take EN102 ever year. The project webpage, which hosts many of the projects, has already received well over 12,000 visits, and it continues to be visited daily. Furthermore, as the research projects of *Literature 2.0* become publically available, they have the potential to contribute to the learning of countless additional students and scholars, further connecting West Point to other civilian institutions.

**Project Description**

EN102 aims to cultivate its students’ written expression; understandably, then, the course allocates a majority of its point distribution to assessing students’ written work. This said, the digital lens through which my students explore literature has an influence on many of their written and creative projects. The projects students engage in are dialogic in nature in that they interact with their audience, and that they are either ‘iterative’ (the first two) or count as larger projects (the second two).

- One such project is the **class wiki**, a crowd-sourced, publicly available informational website that not only summarizes many pertinent literary terms, but also expounds upon the ideas, themes, and other literary elements of the course texts. Throughout the semester, each student researches, updates, and posts three entries on to the class wiki. Over time, the site transforms into a resource for all students enrolled in EN102.

- The class wiki is augmented with another important, ongoing project - the class **Twitter page** upon which students tweet responses to assigned daily readings in an effort not only to only spark in-class discussion, but also to make important connections that we might not otherwise make.

- Next, the class expands upon these connections with each student’s **digital literary autobiography**. In this digital record of the ten most influential texts in their lives, each student explores the influence of literature in their lives and, just as important, how these texts have contributed to their personal and scholarly identities. Additionally, the class also participates in creating a digital geospatial timeline of the decade during which the final course text takes place: the 1980’s.
• Last, for their final assignment, students choose one of the following four capstone/collaborative digital humanities projects:

(1) Digital Variorum – This assignment requires that students digitally encode multiple versions of a poem (or two versions of multiple poems) to trace and compare its textual history.
(2) Digital Ekphrasis – In the tradition of ekphrasis, which is a textual description of a visual work of art, students reinterpret a literary text in a digital, visual form.
(3) Digital Special Collection Project – In cooperation with the USMA Library staff, students digitally transcribe texts currently available only in the library’s special collections. They subsequently produce meta-tagged, open-access versions of the texts so that scholars outside the West Point community can access the material.
(4) Word Cloud – Students create a visual representation of keywords from a course text and then, through hyperlinks, examine their meanings, significance, and contexts.

Impact on Cadet Learning
Beyond the immediate impact of the classroom, the innovative concepts of Literature 2.0 have contributed to cadets’ learning in many meaningful ways. The connections that the cadets make at the intersection between technology and the humanities will continue to have significance in their future classes. This is clearly evident in projects such as the digital variorum where cadets harness new technologies to analyze texts and textual histories. Moreover, their work has the potential to influence many other learners outside of their micro learning community. For example, the Special Collections capstone project will give outside scholars access to documents that they might not otherwise have. Furthermore, all EN102 instructors and students (approximately 1050 individuals) have access to the class wiki page. This site acts as an encyclopedic reference for the important terms and texts discussed in EN102 that all students can use. Furthermore, the students will publish their collaborative digital humanities projects on the class website for learners and scholars outside the West Point community to resource. Last, within West Point’s learning community, the students will present their projects in a public forum during USMA Projects Day.

Collaboration Across Classroom and Disciplines
Many of the Literature 2.0 projects are collaborative endeavors with instructors from within the Department of English and Philosophy. One such project is the geospatial timeline in which MAJ Deborah Daley’s students are also participating. The combined classes will work together to produce over 300 entries in the timeline to create a visual representation of the setting for the final course text.

Furthermore, one of my sections (K34) is an interdisciplinary endeavor in which he shares the same class roster with an IT105 instructor from the Department of Electrical Engineering and
Computer Science (MAJ Ben Klimkowski). Though course goals and many of the major assignments remain unchanged, they tailor many of class discussions and minor assignments to the shared interdisciplinary focus. Furthermore, the final project in both classes is an interdisciplinary digital humanities assignment. As such, students apply the skills they learn in IT105 and EN102 towards a common goal. MAJ Klimkowski and I initially discussed and agreed upon the class concept before gaining the endorsement of both course directors (LTC Naomi Mercer and Dr. Susan Schwartz). In this regard, Literature 2.0 maps the way toward future revision of the EN102 and IT105 core courses to create further interdisciplinary opportunities for cadets at West Point.

**Learning Assessment**
The Literature 2.0 project has been significant in contributing to the learning amongst cadets, specifically in its demand for creativity, reflection, and critical-thinking. The projects involved in this class often necessitate unique and creative approaches from the cadets to succeed. For example, the word cloud assignment (pictured) asks students to apply coding principles learned in IT105 to collate the data of one of the EN102 course texts. Then the students are asked to critically consider the results within the context of the text’s themes and concepts. Such products not only provide new ways to consider the literature, they also demand that the students think critically and creatively about the material. Furthermore such projects offer students an opportunity to make connections across disciplines that they might not otherwise make.

In an effort to quantitatively understand the student response to and effectiveness of the Literature 2.0 project, I conducted a variety of different types of data collection to including grades, website visits, quizzes, twitter participation, voluntary surveys, wiki participation, outside observers, individual discussions with cadets, daily instructor observations, and email feedback from students on projects. The data has suggested that many of the digital projects of the class have contributed to the learning taking place in the classroom. For example, when compared to last year’s students enrolled my EN102 class, cadets participating in the Literature 2.0 project have scored significantly higher in random quizzes on class readings, which suggests that more students are involved with the course material and they have a deeper level of comprehension. This is also evident in the level of participation in ongoing classroom projects such as the Twitter feed and Wiki page.

Furthermore, of the students that responded to a class survey, 88% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the digital projects helped them “better understand the material and concepts of the course.” Furthermore, 78% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the Literature 2.0 project “expanded my horizons” or “contributed to my development as a leader.” All of the survey participants indicated that they had visited the class website multiple times throughout the semester, and all of them “agreed” or “strongly agreed “that the website was “useful for conveying information about the course, texts, and concepts.”
Additionally, in response to an emailed survey asking for feedback on individual projects, participants offered numerous comments pertaining to the effectiveness of the digital projects in the course. For example, one student reflected that the assignment “gave cadets a lot of freedom to be creative with the way they presented the project.” Another thoughtful cadet noted that “using technology such as this is very outside of my comfort zone, so I feel it is helping me develop.” Yet another cadet found the literary autobiography especially helpful, and his comments are worth quoting at length:

“The self-reflection required to complete this project was a huge blessing for me. I had never really taken an in-depth look at the individual books and media that had most impacted my life, nor had I really considered how certain times of my life prepared me for the time I am in now… Learning to do this was by far the best thing I have taken away from the project, as well as an appreciation for the impact that books and media have had and will continue to have on my life. As such, I am developing a reading list that will continue to develop me and provide me with bookmarks for my maturity throughout the years.”

Though much of the student feedback has been positive and their motivation for the material is clearly evident, a handful of students have noted a lack of familiarity with the technologies necessary to complete some of the projects. While one of the project goals was to encourage student exploration of unfamiliar technologies, if I were to undertake this project again, I would ensure that I was more attentive to providing students with the resources necessary to understand the tools used in the classroom. To this end, I would dedicate more classroom time to “lab work” with the intent of focusing on digital technologies.

Final Conclusions

Further work on this project could lead to a more significant web presence aimed at the ongoing research within the digital humanities at USMA. Beyond the clear benefits to the students enrolled in EN102, the Literature 2.0 project has the potential to become a more permanent feature at the Academy. The Department of English and Philosophy has a history of textual scholarship (in such endeavors as the Faulkner Concordance Project) and the Academy is well placed to harness new technologies for future digital humanities endeavors. Universities such as Stanford, Princeton, and Harvard have already established similar sites to contribute to this exciting new field. I initially created the Literature 2.0 project to enhance the learning of the students in his EN102 classroom, but with further investment and sustained support, the project has the potential to affect many other students and scholars at the Academy and beyond.