The Innovative Instructor

Pedagogy

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A Low Tech Approach to Digital Literacy

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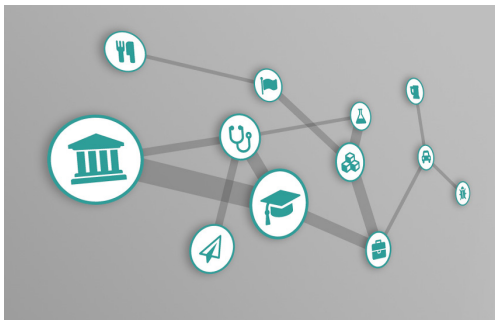
The issue

Humanities scholarship has made progress in examining the usefulness and effectiveness of digital tools for addressing core disciplinary questions and for launching inquiries that stimulate new interdisciplinary perspectives. Fewer models exist for integrating digital research approaches into teaching, particularly around objects. Yet digital technologies have transformed how we create knowledge about and how we experience things.



My objective was to engage students in the practice of making knowledge from and about objects available for the public, online, without having to learn coding. Each student was asked to research three objects found in artist Mark Dion's Archaeology of Knowledge, a cabinet of curiosities style installation of Johns Hopkins University collections in the Brody Learning Commons. The students collaborated to produce a web-based exhibition of their findings. I wanted students to work directly with primary materials in a wide range of media and approach them both conceptually and through practice.

Why does it matter

Digital tools provide rich resources for those engaged in humanistic studies. Learning how to evaluate online sources is a crucial skill for all students to develop, as is understanding the importance of data and metadata standards in managing information acquired in the research process. Despite their theoretical understanding that online sources vary in reliability and their intuitive use of the internet, undergraduate students are underprepared to evaluate sources and don't understand digital processes of creating, disseminating, and making discoverable information. These practices correlate with how we make sense of collections. Introducing students to the challenges of curating objects in a web-based environment can build their sense of how content is effectively developed and disseminated online.

Faculty solution

With the award of a Humanities and Social Sciences project grant from the Center for Educational Resources, I decided to use Omeka to develop a hands-on approach in this course for students to learn how to work with objects and collections using digital tools. Omeka is a free, open-source, web-publishing tool developed at George Mason University for creating digital collections and exhibitions that has been successfully used at museums and in academic contexts. The grant funding was used to hire programmers to customize our instance of Omeka so that students' interpretive work could be

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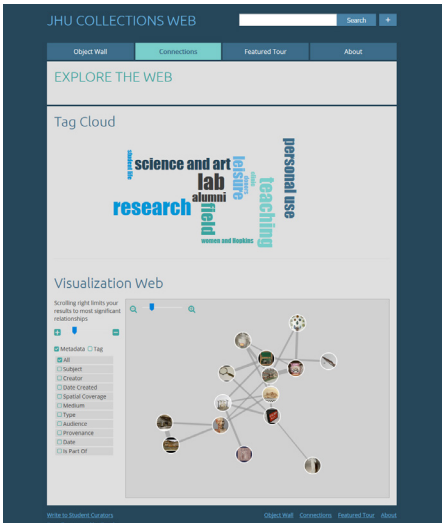
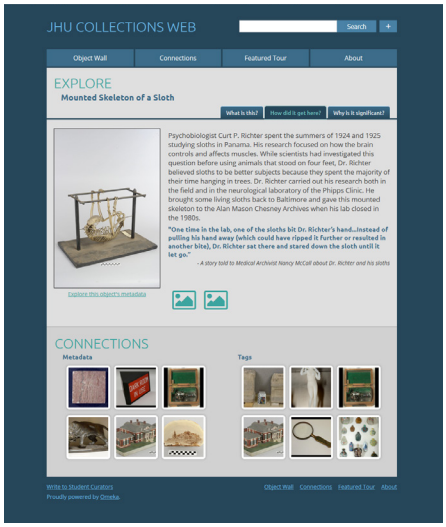


Screenshot from the Connections tab



An object's Explore page

confronted to computerized processes in real time with the aim of considering 1) the robustness of their conclusions and 2) the local and constructed nature of data. The site models in a microcosm the connectivity of knowledge the Internet provides by displaying linked relationships among the objects shown. The lessons this approach offers for students are threefold: how to describe and tell a story about material objects online, what happens to an object when it becomes digital, and how what we understand of an object changes as it is linked to other objects and related resources.

A series of templates and plugins were developed in Omeka to ensure that the process of cataloging and curating the objects was consistent across the student collaborators. Metadata and data standards were developed and made transparent in the platform itself. It was important that students not be burdened by the technology as they developed content, tested and revised it as necessary. Along with documentation on how to use Omeka, example content was created as part of the tool so that the students would have a basis for their own work.

Results

Using formative assessment is valuable in any course, especially so the first time it is taught. Midway through the semester I discussed expectations and challenges with the students and asked for feedback through an anonymous survey. Students felt the goals of the course for teaching digital concepts were being met, but were thirsty to learn more, and were finding lessons on university history overwhelming. I realized that the course had too many goals. This prompted me to refocus the end of the semester more exclusively on virtual museums. Students found these readings to be helpful after they had started to engage with Omeka as they then had access to additional scholarship to relate to what they were creating.

Over the course of the semester as students cataloged and interpreted their objects, they encountered a series of challenges that we discussed as a group. These discussions were a valuable component of the research and collaborative process. Sometimes after inputting data students would find that an object didn't have a linked relationship as they had expected. This would lead to questions about the accuracy of their interpretation of the evidence, the construction of their data, and about how their historical conclusions about their objects correlated to the findings and interpretations of their collaborators.

As an example of a challenge, one student researched a scale model of the Homewood House (located on the JHU campus), and found that multiple models had been created, each with a slightly different historical trajectory. The student had to re-evaluate her research to determine that she had identified the model and its story correctly, and then had to express her findings accurately at both the data and narrative levels.

These types of issues and questions are central to research practice in the humanities. Using Omeka to build an online exhibition collaboratively allowed my students to experience first-hand the process of undertaking research: critical evaluation of sources; using data and metadata standards; evidence-based cataloguing and interpretation of material culture objects; and sharing their findings as part of scholarly and public knowledge-scapes.

Other thoughts

Working with the developers to customize Omeka to meet the goals of the course allowed me to think broadly about the challenges and rewards presented by digital humanities projects. Creating the framework for this project provided insight on how to present information to my class about digital humanities work in general, and particularly on how to do so without overly burdening my teaching or the students with technical detail.

Additional resources

- Course site in Omeka "JHU Collections Web": http://collectionsweb.jhu.edu
- Omeka, web publishing for archives and collections from George Mason University: http://omeka.org

Author's background

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Jennifer Kingsley is Lecturer and Assistant Director of the Program in Museums and Society. A specialist in medieval art history, her research and teaching interests center on image theory, memory-making, aesthetics and historiography. She teaches an array of courses about art in the museum context and about virtual museums.