# Letter from Ben

Hello and welcome to DSAM 3000, the informatively named Seminar in Digital Studies and Methods! (I hope that, midway through the first lesson, you’ll see that I’m only half-joking.) I like to start the semester with a letter for a few reasons: one, because it feels more personal than a syllabus, which tends to be more about policy than personality; two, because I feel like part of my job is always to help you as writers and presenters, so it’s only fair to present some of my own writing; and three, because the act of writing the letter actually helps me think about the semester more synthetically than planning individual lessons or reading assignments, and once I’ve got that synthetic sense of how it all hangs together, I see no reason not to share it with you.

The way I see it, this seminar is here to help you open methodological doors: to give you a sense of what’s possible with digital tools, sure, but even more so to give you the confidence to keep trying new things, even when they’re hard, and enough experience to know where to look for things to try. I can’t find all those things for you; there just isn’t enough time, and in any case, you’d then be limited to the kinds of questions that drive me, or the particular tools I’ve come across so far.

Maybe this is the moment to say what kinds of things I know best. My own path to this room is through Writing Studies, or Rhetoric and Composition, and my research has mostly involved visualizing metadata (data *about* data), especially metadata about written sources: things like where they were written, and when, that might be applicable to other kinds of corpora. For the kind of analysis I’ve done most, word order isn’t as important as how many times words come up. I end up saying “in the aggregate” a lot. I work with code, though I’m not a brilliant programmer, and that combination gives me a deep appreciation for the scale of what brilliant programmers have been able to achieve, as well as an even deeper appreciation for how many tutorials and walkthroughs and entire open codesets have been seeded generously across the internet. There’s just a ton out there to discover! So I see my role in DSAM 3000 less as an expert tour guide and more as a fellow traveler who’s been on the road a while. I can tell you my enthusiasms (and I probably will, if you get me started), but I’ll be equally excited if you find something I’ve never seen before, and excited also to explore it with you.

If we’re being real, though you *are* kind of stuck with my experience-thus-far in terms of shared readings and demos – I can’t yet know what I don’t know yet – which is why I do devote some time to code, data, and GitHub. Things that have been formative for me will tend to inform what I think might be relevant to you. But the shared assignments are really just a kind of crossroads inn to bring us back together after repeated excursions, and to give us a shared vocabulary for talking about our trips. And toward the end of the semester (starting around Election Day), I’ve planned three weeks of “people’s choice”: I’ve got readings planned for at least eight possible conversations, and if there’s a topic you’d rather dig into that’s not on that list, give me a week-or-two head start and I can pull together something on that.

One of the first shared assignments, due by the end of this week, is to watch a video that Miriam Posner put together as a “field guide to digital projects,” trying to trace the recurring patterns she saw in the work students and faculty were doing in the Digital Humanities. (This was back in 2013–2014, but a lot of the patterns still apply.) Beyond the clusters of project-types she identifies – which she’s the first to admit is not an exhaustive list – she highlights the way that a lot of digital projects come down to *“sources, processed and presented.”* In other words, you take some source material – a book, a film, an archaeological site, an archival collection, etc – and you do something to it to make it tractable by digital machines. And then you use the digital machines to make some aspect of that source material more tangible, visible, accessible, present.

Maybe some of you are already thinking of what your sources could be; maybe you have questions that will lead you to define that source material, or maybe you have some material in mind to work with, and want the machines to help you find the questions. Either approach is fine! In my experience, those are two poles of an alternating current that powers most projects, including writing projects: exhibits need arguments for interpretation, arguments need exhibits for evidence. Wherever you start, you’ll likely need to go both ways.

That’s one reason the independent projects for this class are designed to be produced through *iterations*: you really, truly, don’t want to build a digital project as a one-and-done, no matter how quickly you can turn out a draft of a seminar paper. Some parts may feel automatic, and fast; but figuring out which automations to run, and what to do with the outputs, and – ha! that’s assuming there will even *be* an output without lots of experimentation matching your inputs to what the software expects – suffice it to say, [as Paul Valéry said of poems](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4333487), a digital project is “never really finished, only abandoned.”

So you need to build some resilience, and some momentum. You need to see the incremental progress you’re making, even if it feels sometimes like you’re moving backwards or sideways or not moving at all. And you need to know that you’re not alone in feeling that way.

I’ve built in a few ways of facilitating this.

First, I’m going to ask you to privately account for your working time. Record it in whatever way you see fit, but it must be recorded somehow: write down what hours you worked on your project, and what you did in that time. We’ll call this (borrowing the title from Alison Langmead, who taught this course for many years), your *Mindful Practice Journals*; see the [Projects](file:////%257B%257Bsite.course.base_path%257D%257Dprojects#mindful-practice-journal) page for more. Looking back at these notes, you’ll know you weren’t wasting time: you were reading documentation, or you were cleaning messy data, or so on and so forth. And maybe even writing! Who knows. But you were *moving*.

Second, I’m going to ask you to publicly present your project: before it’s finished, and multiple times. Four times, to be exact – once each month. To help you deepen your project and see the progress you’re making, I’ve named each of these iterations using Posner’s summary as a template: first establish what you’re working with (iteration 1: sources); then figure out how to make it tractable by computers (iteration 2: processed); ideally, that gives you space to form some hypotheses, a sense of what processing these sources helps you to see or say (iteration 3: and…?); the final day of class will be about showcasing all you’ve achieved (iteration 4: presented).

These presentations can be informal – they’re about work in progress, after all – and will draw not only on whatever you think you’ve “accomplished,” but also on the processes you’ve written down in your Mindful Practice Journals. What habits or patterns you each notice, individually, will be put side by side with what your classmates noticed, and working together we’re more likely to figure some things out. As we move forward, I’ll have more specific guidance for how to prepare for the presentations – and how to [share your project-in-progress with the larger world](file:////Users/MILLERB/OneDrive-UniversityofPittsburgh%20(Archive)/_BoxMigration/teaching/DSAM%203000/%257B%257Bsite.course.base_path%257D%257Dprojects#palimpsest-of-public-iteration).

Third, and potentially related to that last point, I’m going to make sure everyone here knows how to use GitHub, one of the places a lot of digital humanities projects are shared (along with a great many more projects beyond DH). It’s a place where you can post files, and write about them, even if you don’t want to make a website. (Though if you do want to make a website, GitHub lets you do that, too.) But best of all, as we’ll discuss after next week’s break, GitHub prominently displays and celebrates the work-in-progress-ness of *all* its projects, because it makes the dynamic history of every file visible.

Because digital projects are variable and changing, even as they remain themselves. Kind of like people, if you think about it.

I look forward to marking the changes with you!

Ben