Digital Public History

Contents

> "...history may be better suited to digital technology than any other humanistic discipline. Changes in our field far removed from anything to do with computers have helped create a situation in history where the advantages of computers can seem appealing, and perhaps even necessary. At the same time, changes in information technology, far removed from any consideration of its possible uses for our discipline, have made it possible for us to think of new ways to approach the past. The new technologies seem tailor-made for history, a match for the growing bulk and complexity of our ever more self-conscious practice, efficient vehicles to connect with larger and more diverse audiences."

— Edward L. Ayers, "The Pasts and Futures of Digital History" (1999)

Description

The work of public history calls for taking historical scholarship out into the world to meet the needs and interests of diverse non-academic audiences. While much of that work has traditionally happened in face-to-face encounters and at physical locations (museums, monuments, historic sites, etc.), public historians are increasingly finding and connecting with their audiences through digital means, such as exhibit websites, collection and archives websites, mobile applications, social media, podcasts, newsletters, blogs, and digital simulations.

This course introduces you to the theories and methods of doing digital public history and will equip you with many of the skills necessary to plan and execute your own projects. We will spend time thinking about audience, developing digital strategies to meet the needs of those audiences, creating effective digital exhibits, describing and publishing digital collections, looking at how mobile computing is changing the nature of digital public history, considering the ins and outs of sharing authority with the general public through participatory history projects, and discussing effective methods for evaluating digital public history work.

Because the course happens online rather than face to face, I'll also be asking you to think about how the challenges of learning online help you to understand the challenges of producing public history online.

Learning Outcomes

- You will have an understanding of the relationship between in-person public history work and digital public history.
- You will have an understanding of the range of digital public history work past and present.
- You will have an understanding of the centrality of evaluation and audience research in conceiving and executing digital public history projects.
- You will have a familiarity with the range of tools and approaches that public historians are using to create digital public history experiences.
- You will have created a digital public history website or experience.

Important Dates

- January 18 (4:00pm ET) – All class meeting on Zoom
- February 15 or 16 (signup online) – Individual meetings with me on Zoom
- February 28 (4:30pm ET) – All class meeting on Zoom
- March 21 (4:30pm ET) – All class meeting on Zoom

- April 11 or 12 – Individual meetings with me on Zoom
- April 18 (4:30pm ET) – All class meeting on Zoom

Communication

There are several ways that we will communicate this semester, all listed below. Please note that I take Saturdays off from email/text/etc., and I'm fairly limited on Sundays as well. I should be available any other day of the week, but weekends will be considerably less or not at all.

Slack: The single most important way we'll stay in touch is our class Slack channel (http://dphspring2024.slack.com). I will invite you to the channel just before the semester begins. If you haven't used Slack already, it is an easy to use, intuitive project management platform that I use for teaching and at RRCHNM for project management.

- **Email**: jheppler@gmu.edu.
- **Zoom**: We'll be using Zoom throughout the semester for both individual meetings and our synchronous group sessions. The address of my Zoom room is found here.
- **Cell**: I will provide my cell phone number via email. You should feel free to text me any time (although the weekend rule also holds for texts). Please be sure to identify yourself, because your phone number won't be in my contact list at first. If you call and aren't yet in my contacts, please text first so I know to answer. My phone screens every call not in my contact list.

Course Structure

The course is organized around four main topics and these are divided into 13 modules. The main topics are:

- Doing public history
- Introduction to the basics of building digital collections and interpretative websites.
- The various genres of digital public history work
- Project prototyping and evaluation

The 13 modules that are nested under these topics must be completed in order, with the exception of the modules 6-9, which may be completed in any order you like. At the end of the semester, you will complete a final project, described in Appendix A below. Along the way, you will write a number of portfolio blog posts, also described below, a comparative essay, and one final reflective blog post.

Course Requirements

1. You must have access to a computer and a reliable Internet connection. The modules for this course are web-based and require several hours weekly. The online portfolio and digital project also require Internet access.
2. Unless you already have your own functioning domain where you can install software, you must sign up for a domain with Reclaim Hosting (reclaimhosting.com). The cost is $30 for one year. I require Reclaim Hosting because they are inexpensive and have excellent customer service. All of my own work is hosted there and I have had zero regrets. There are no books to purchase.
3. This is a graduate course, so I expect you to do your work in a timely manner and at a high level of quality. That said, we all have lives and multiple responsibilities and are still living through the aftermath of a global pandemic. If your life or your non-school responsibilities are getting in the way of doing your work on time and at a high level of quality, please know that I need you to have a conversation with me about that as soon as it becomes apparent to you. Don't wait until you are way behind and your work is suffering. The modules in the course are partly collaborative, so if you aren't keeping up with the work, others in the course will find it difficult to complete their own assignments. I'm very flexible, but I need to be in the loop about what's going on in order to be flexible.

Assignments

There are many assignments that you have to complete for this course. The weekly assignments should be completed prior to the all-class meeting in the syllabus that corresponds to that part of the semester. So, for instance, all the assignments through the end of Module 3 should be completed before the February 28 all-class meeting. Major assignments (Appendix A) are due according to the dates listed in the schedule online.

- Readings: You are expected to do all the readings and complete the tasks in the online modules.
- Writing: You will write a series of blog posts: one introducing yourself to the rest of the class, then four "portfolio posts" that address a particular question related to the readings/activities in the online modules. These are all due on dates listed in the syllabus. You will also write a comparative review of two public history sites (a physical site with a substantial public history presence).
- Personas: You will draft and then revise two personas (described in detail below) within the course website. These personas are particularly important to the work you'll do on your final project.
- Project: The major project for the semester will be a prototype of a digital public history project.

Grading

Grades for the semester are computed as follows:

- Readings/Online tasks (20%) – graded pass/fail
- Blog posts (30%)
- Site review (10%)
- Personas (5%)
- Final project (35%)

Course Policies

This syllabus may be updated online as necessary. The online version of this syllabus is the only authoritative version.

ADA: Any student who requires special arrangements in order to meet course requirements should contact me to make necessary accommodations (before week two of the semester please). Students should present appropriate verification from the Disability Resource Center.

Medical and Other Excuses: Every semester someone is forced to miss an assignment either as the result of an illness or a family emergency. If you find yourself in this situation, fairness to all students in the class requires the proper documentation, without which your excuses will not be accepted. If you need to know more about this process consult me as soon as the emergency is taken care of.

Plagiarism: This is a graduate course and I have every expectation that you will do your own work. If I have reason to believe that you are plagiarizing another's work, we will discuss my concerns. If your explanations don't satisfy me, I'll turn the whole matter over to the university honor committee for adjudication. In addition to my own high expectations when it comes to academic honesty, the university also expects students to demonstrate a high code of personal honor when it comes to academic work. Please read the George Mason University Honor Code. If you have any questions about what is expected of you in this regard. Penalties for academic dishonesty are severe, including, but not limited to failing the assignment, failing the course, many hours of community service, suspension or even expulsion from the university.

How the Online Course Works

By now you have been (or should have been) given access to the course website. When you go to the site what you will see is a series of tasks to complete. You may work ahead if you like, but please do not fall behind. The various dates for when things are due are all in the course modules. You can proceed at your own pace, but there are some modules that require you to look at the work of others

and comment on it. And, of course, you need to have assignments completed by the due dates in the online modules.

We'll meet as a group four times and individually at least twice during the semester. Because I work remotely, all of those meetings will be via Zoom. I'm always happy to schedule ad hoc meetings as needed.

Appendix A: Description of Major Assignments

I. Physical/Digital Exhibit Comparative Review

In this activity, you will analyze and compare the ways that curators have represented a historical topic in a physical exhibit and on a website. The goal of this assignment is for you to get a feel for the ways that historical interpretation and audience engagement vary between the two spaces. To accomplish this task:

1. Select a public history site near you that also has a fully articulated online presence, i.e., one that offers online visitors a chance to actually engage with the content of the exhibit, not just find out how to get to the physical site and look at a couple of pictures. The physical site you select could be a history museum, a state or county historical society, an historic house museum, or historic site near you. Please stick to public history sites; art and natural history museums are great, but they're not really the focus here and won't help you complete the assignment.
2. Visit to the physical site. If it is a large institution with multiple exhibits, select one of the more substantial exhibits to focus on. Approach the site (or exhibit) as a researcher, taking notes along the way:
   - What is the argument about history embodied in the site? How well does the physical design communicate that argument? What is the interpretive point of view?
   - Who is the primary audience for this work? What types of visitors are actually in the space?
   - What are the primary items used to communicate the interpretation? What other materials are used to frame and contextualize the primary items?
   - How is the site laid out? Is it easy to navigate? Does it encourage a single flow of traffic?
   - Are there any interactive elements in the physical space? What are they and how effective are they?
   - Are their curators/interpreters/docents in the space? How are they interacting with the public?
   - How would you change the physical exhibit to make it more effective?
3. Visit the website for the public history site or exhibition that you analyzed and complete a similar review of the website:
   - What is the argument about history that is embodied in the digital representation? How well does the design communicate that

argument? What is the interpretive point of view of the site?
- Who is the primary audience for this work? How well does it succeed in delivering materials that are appropriate for that audience? What assumptions does it make about the audience?
- How is the site laid out? Is it easy to navigate? Does it encourage a single flow of traffic?
- What kinds of content does the site offer? How does this differ from the content that resides in the physical space?
- Does the site have participatory or interactive elements? What are they? What does the user take away from these experiences?
- Are there opportunities to interact with the site's creators? If so,how? Is this interaction central to the success of the site?
- How would you change the digital experience to make it more effective?

4. Write 1,500 words (six pages). Include a clear header that identifies both the physical and the digital sites and who is responsible for each. Post the review essay to your blog as a .pdf file with a brief introductory summary of 100-200 words that draws the reader into what you've written.

For a good example of how digital project reviews may look, I strongly recommend referencing the digital history reviews in the *Journal of American History* and the guidelines they provide.

II. Personas

Within the course website you will draft and revise two user personas to use with your work on your Major Digital Public History Project. Each persona should include fully articulated descriptions of a composite character's:

- name,
- demographic data,
- descriptive title,
- photograph,
- quote,
- a day-in-the-life narrative,
- end goals (explicit and tacit).

The information required under each heading is described in detail in the online module.

III. Major Digital Public History Project

For your major project for this course, you will design and develop a prototype digital public history project. Your project will require that you balance rigorous historical scholarship and digital development skills, while designing for a specific audience or audiences. Possible project types include:

- A website that offers content and interpretation on an historic person, place, or event
- A participatory website that offers members of the public the opportunity to contribute, describe, or remix historical materials

- A multi-platform campaign that is tied to an anniversary or memorialization
- A tool or platform that supports users in doing their own historical work
- A platform that brings members of a community together to engage with one another about the role of history in contemporary issues

Your work on the project will proceed through several development stages, including a proposal, a draft stage, peer review and feedback, a video/screencast presentation, and the completion of the final project. The requirements for each of these stages are:

1. An elevator pitch of no more than one minute that explains what you plan to create and why.

2. A proposal (500 words) that includes a description of the history questions and content to be included; a description of the digital technologies to be mobilized in the work and the key features of the prototype; a description of the target audiences and how the project will reach them.

3. A draft prototype that is as close to complete as possible, including all the primary source content, full metadata, additional interpretive content, and all functional technical elements.

4. Peer review feedback should be provided based on the following criteria:

    - Historical content and interpretation
    - Audience engagement and usability
    - Appropriateness of technology

5. A simple video (phones are fine as videocameras) of no more than 3 minutes that introduces a member of the general public to your project. The presentation should address the project's major historical questions and content, the intended audience, and its digital features.

6. The final prototype of your project should demonstrate all of the major features of your proposed work with enough depth of content and functionality that a user can get a sense of the ways that a larger implementation would address key historical questions and content, and use digital technologies to share that material with a public audience.

Credits

This course heavily borrows from Mills Kelly.