Debates in the Digital Humanities

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Looking for Whitman: A Grand, Aggregated Experiment

MATTHEW K. GOLD AND JIM GROOM

Unscrew the locks from the doors!
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

In the spring of 2009, students from four universities converged on a single website in a collaborative effort to research and explore the poetry of Walt Whitman. Conceived of as a multicampus experiment in digital pedagogy seeking to break through the institutional barriers that, even in the age of the Internet, so often divide one university classroom from another, "Looking for Whitman: The Poetry of Place in the Life and Work of Walt Whitman" was sponsored by two Start-Up Grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Office of Digital Humanities.[1] The project brought together five courses on Walt Whitman, each running concurrently at a college located in a place where Whitman himself had lived and worked, in an attempt to see how a group of distributed faculty and students could share, collaborate, research, and converse out in the open through a rich infrastructure of social media.

While each course ran on a face-to-face basis at its respective university, a large majority of the work took place online. The project served as an opportunity to illustrate how loosely networked learning spaces could be used to reimagine the possibilities for connection among students and faculty working on related projects at a disparate range of institutions. As a case study for linked courses across universities, it framed the importance of an open and porous learning ecosystem that used network effects to aggregate and amplify student work, building a larger, focused conversation around the relationship of particular literary texts to particular geographical spaces.

The colleges chosen for participation in the project—New York City College of Technology (CUNY), New York University (NYU), University of Mary Washington, and Rutgers University-Camden—represented a wide range of institutional profiles:

an open-admissions public college of technology, a private research-intensive university, a public liberal arts college, and a public research university, each with very different types of students. Beyond that, the courses explicitly and intentionally engaged various levels of the curriculum and learners with very different types of backgrounds and knowledge bases. The class at University of Mary Washington consisted of senior English majors who were taking the course as a capstone experience. There were two classes at Rutgers; one contained a mix of undergraduate English majors and master's-level students, while the other was open to students in master's and doctoral degree programs who were taking a methods course that served as an introduction to graduate English studies. At City Tech, meanwhile, undergraduate students with little training in literature were taking a course on Whitman as part of their general education requirements. The project gained an international angle when NYU faculty member Karen Karbiener received a Fulbright Fellowship to Serbia and decided to make her American Studies class at the University of Novi Sad part of the project.

Mixing all of these students together in a single online space—especially one that placed a great deal of emphasis on social interaction—might seem at best a bad idea and at worst a dangerous one. What could graduate students studying literature and preparing for comprehensive exams learn from undergraduate students taking gen-ed courses at an urban school of technology? Would students flame one another on a course site that emphasized social media? Would undergrads be intimidated by graduate students who were doing research in their fields of specialization? How would these students connect to one another across individual institutional cultures and socioeconomic differences? And above all, how would they collectively engage Whitman's work and connect his texts to the places in which they had been written?

A look around the *Looking for Whitman* website and its diverse array of assignments and projects will demonstrate the meaningful connections created through this pedagogical experiment. From videos that remixed Whitman's work to detailed annotations and explications of his poems to a collaboratively built museum devoted to Whitman-related material artifacts, student projects demonstrated the power of networked academic study. Of course, that work did not take place without complications; we're just beginning to sort through the evaluation data associated with the project, and we're especially looking forward to tabulating student responses to the extensive survey we circulated at the close of the semester.

Still, it's not too early to say that the radical potential of projects like *Looking for Whitman*—and perhaps of digital humanities pedagogy more generally—lies in their ability to connect learners in ways that hack around the artificial boundaries of selectivity and elitism that educational institutions have long erected around themselves. And if one result of that hacking is the creation of more open, more diverse, more egalitarian learning environments that engage a broader spectrum of students and institutions in the hope that they, like Whitman himself, might stitch

together common fabrics from diverse threads, the digital humanities might find that it has a social mission that complements its technological one.

NOTES

Parts of this chapter originally appeared as "Looking for Whitman: A Grand, Aggregated Experiment" (http://bavatuesdays.com/looking-for-whitman-a-grand-aggregated -experiment/) and "Hacking Together Egalitarian Educational Communities; Some Notes on the Looking for Whitman Project" (http://mkgold.net/blog/2010/05/28/hacking -together-egalitarian-educational-communities-some-notes-on-the-looking-for -whitman-project/).

   1. *Looking for Whitman.* http://lookingforwhitman.org.