Debates in the Digital Humanities

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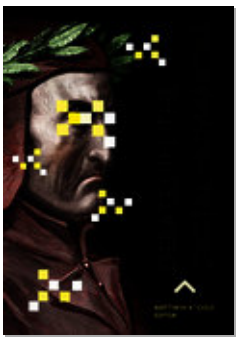

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The Public Course Blog: The Required Reading We Write Ourselves for the Course That Never Ends

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Ninety-two blog posts,
one hundred and ninety-five comments,
twenty projects.

This is the digital footprint of my digital history seminar, the first course I ever taught. In designing it, I did what came naturally to me: I bought the domain name Dighist.org and set up a public course blog. This blog served as a common place for us to think aloud and work together publicly; it also played a valuable role in the face-to-face class, and it will continue to serve a valuable role in the future. The blog was not simply a supplement to the course; rather, it played a cognitive role in the distributed structure of the class, moving it from knowledge consumption to knowledge production. It allowed us to disseminate the thinking that happened in our class beyond those who registered to take the course at American University. In what follows, I will suggest the potential value that can come from new students in new iterations of the course "inhabiting" the same course blog in the future.

The Course Blog as a Spider's Web

In *Supersizing the Mind Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*, philosopher Andy Clark adapts the idea of niche construction from evolutionary biology to an idea of cognitive niche construction, which he applies to the way people use tools. In evolutionary biology, niche construction refers to the "varying degrees, organisms chose their own habitats, mates, and resources and construct important components of their local environments such as nest, holes, burrows, paths, webs, dams, and chemical environments" (131). In each of these cases, animals' behavior has altered their environment, and those alterations then become the basis for further adaptation. One of the primary examples of this kind of interaction is the spider's web. Specifically, "the existence of the web modifies the sources of natural

selection within the spider's selective niche, allowing subsequent selection for web-based forms of camouflage and communication" (61).

During our course, the blog served a similar role to a spider's web. The structure of the blog changed what it meant to do "class" in the classroom. As we interacted with the blog, as it provided a structure for us to share our thoughts and ideas and displayed those thoughts and ideas to anyone on the web, it pushed us to think differently about our course time. Our writing counted, our writing mattered, in a way that is different from many courses, especially at the undergraduate level. Students were not just writing papers for me to evaluate; they were composing public writing for an audience that included both their classmates and anyone from the broader digital history community. They were writing about exciting new projects that their academic community might not have even been aware of. On several occasions I would tell one of the students who had reviewed a particular software application that the creator of that software had read and posted a tweet with a link to the student's review. After making clear that students could blog under their real names and take credit and responsibility for their thoughts and ideas or blog under pseudonyms, nearly everyone opted to use their names and receive credit for their ideas on the web. We were writing for an audience, and that changed how we all approached writing about history and the production of history.

Like a Beaver Dam, the Blog We Built Together Will House the Next Generation

The spider's web is interesting as an example of how an organism's use of tools changes the cycles of feedback in their evolution. The example of a beaver's dam adds another layer of complexity. As Clark points out, dams are created and inhabited by a collective group of individual beavers. Further, beaver dams extended through time, outliving the lives of the individual beavers who occupy them. Future beavers adapt to the niche that the beavers before them had created and the altered physical landscape that that dam has produced. What matters for Clark in this case is that "niche-construction activity leads to new feedback cycles" (62). I intend the course blog site, Dighist.org, to persist into the future like a beaver's dam. The thinking and work of my students, as manifest in the structure of the content they have produced, will play an active role in the thinking and work of future students who occupy the space.

The Technological Husk of the Course Will Be Reinhabited

According to American University, my course is over. End of semester. Students received their grades. But the grades are the least interesting part of what makes a course a course. Not only am I keeping the content up, I intend to use this same WordPress instance for future iterations of the course. Whoever joins future digital history courses I teach is going to register for this blog and start posting. I will move

the current syllabus to an archived syllabus page and post the future student projects right above the existing set. The next set of students will understand that they are not starting a class from scratch; they will build on the work of course alumni just as future students will later build off of their work.

When I started this course, I told students that the course blog would be the required reading that we write ourselves. Next time, I will add that the course blog is the required reading we are writing for ourselves and for future inhabitants of the course. Some of the particularly interesting reviews of software applications are going to become course content in future iterations of the syllabus. Some of the particularly interesting student web projects are going to become examples I will use in class. Some of the particularly interesting student papers will become course readings. Students from this first session of the course are welcome to continue posting and commenting on the blog.

All too often, we think about instructional technology as something that supplements the features of face-to-face instruction. If we want to think this way, then that is in fact what these technologies are going to do. BlackBoard is happy to put a closed course blog inside of its learning management system. Their blogs adapt the features of the technology of a blog for a closed system. That isn't really blogging. Blogging involves certain technical requirements, posting bits of text on the web and generally allowing others to comment on those posts. Beyond this, however, blogging is a cultural phenomena. As a genre of public writing, it has an emergent set of norms and rules that we should learn by doing. In short, blogging is actually a set of skills that is worth cultivating. When we start to think of the technology of blogging in this light, it becomes something that, instead of supplementing instruction, disrupts and transforms education.

NOTES

This chapter originally appeared as "Digital History: The Course That Never Ends" (http://www.trevorowens.org/ . . . /digital-history-the-course-that-never-ends/).

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Clark, Andy. *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

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