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Digital Humanities Curriculum Transforms Study of Literature

By Geoff Gehman
An assignment for their Studies in Chaucer class became an academic pilgrimage for Wilkes sophomores Tara Giarratano and Nicole Kutos. They visited archives in two states and two countries without leaving Kirby Hall. They debuted as handwriting analysts, editors and archivists. They were digital detectives, searching for how words open worlds.

The two students spent fall 2014 transcribing the work of medieval scribes with a Mac computer. Sitting side by side in the English department’s digital studio, the pair dissected 100 lines in four different manuscripts of *The Miller’s Tale*, a pivotal part of *The Canterbury Tales*. They used collation software to log variations in spelling and syntax; they footnoted definitions and comparisons with the help of the online *Middle English Dictionary*. After scores of hours, they had created their own scholarly edition of Chaucer’s colorful introductions of key characters, including a carpenter’s wife prettier than a blooming pear tree.

Thomas A. Hamill, associate professor of English and their teacher, praises Giarratano and Kutos for plodding along the electronic pike to interact with literature in a new way. “Struggling to decipher 14th- and 15th-century scribal hands, grinding out lines of transcription, put them in unfamiliar spaces and gave them a set of uncommon experiences,” says Hamill, an authority on medieval manuscripts. “Instead of following maps, they had to make their own maps. They didn’t just interface; they interacted.”

Kutos and Giarratano are pioneer partners in the English program’s new digital humanities concentration, where students have created a video featuring World War I poems and examined Victorian society by tracking a single word in *Wuthering Heights*.

As the future of print is debated, scholars are embracing digital resources in their studies. Typically aligned with English programs, digital humanities is an emerging field engaging students in the long-term challenges that digital technologies pose for the future of human literary, linguistic and scholarly work. It challenges students to use emerging technologies to research and to present their work. Archival resources from around the world can be accessed online, while final projects might be a website instead of a research paper.

Wilkes’ English department is the first among regional colleges to introduce a digital humanities curriculum. Launched last year, it is designed to turn students already adept as social-media users into more scholarly digital stewards while giving them more marketable skills. It’s also designed to make a relatively solitary discipline—the academic study of literature—more collaborative while marketing the department as more progressive and practical.

“No one in the room is a digital humanities specialist right now, but that affords us an opportunity to define the brand,” says Lawrence Kuhar, who chairs the English department and who has taught at Wilkes for 27 years. “Digital humanities engages us in a broader negotiation with knowledge and reality. It moves us into new ways of making meaning. It’s exceptionally postmodern. We’re in a different world altogether.”

Left: Lawrence Kuhar, English department chair, teaches the Introduction to Digital Humanities class in the new concentration. Photo by Earl and Sedor Photographic

Above: Thomas A. Hamill, associate professor of English, examines a facsimile of the Hengwrt manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales* with students Nicole Kutos and Tara Giarratano, center. The students’ transcription of the manuscript page is on the right of the screen. Photo by Knot Just Any Day Photography
Kuhar explored this brave new world in his class Introduction to Digital Humanities. For one project, he asked students to demonstrate the value of digital technology as a humanities tool. Sophomore Victoria Rendina chose a letter by Vincent Van Gogh, her favorite artist, from an online collection run by his namesake museum in his native Amsterdam. She had access to the original letter in Dutch, the English translation, footnotes and image. She found inspiration in Van Gogh’s exquisitely sharp descriptions of rising from his sick bed to paint "The Bedroom," the star of countless postcards and posters. What emerged for her was a 3-D portrait of “how someone so tragic could make something so beautiful,” she says.

Art and artifact were bound together in the other new digital humanities course, Technologies of the Book. In the seminar, Hamill traced books as agents of technological revolution, whether printed by Gutenberg or digitized by Google. Again, his main agent was Chaucer.

Hamill instructed his Technologies of the Book students to create their own Chaucerian edition from 10 of the 50-odd manuscripts available in digital facsimile online. Decoding and coding 14th-century words from so many hands evolved from a miserable exercise to a pleasurable experience. “They were not happy campers at first,” says Hamill. “But they were so committed to slogging along together; they really took that part to heart. They got to argue for one manuscript reading over another. They got to unpack a lot of the nuances that get covered up or are reduced to esoterics in footnotes and textual notes. It ended up being an illuminating and empowering experience.”

For the first time he assigned the creation of a web page as a final project. His students basically created Internet guides to the course’s three areas of focus: medieval manuscripts, early printed books and the transformation of the book in the digital age.

Associate Professor Helen Davis also uses electronic resources in her classes. Understanding what technology makes possible, she did something last year she had never done: She asked every student in her Victorian Literature class to track a single word in a novel of their choice. Tara Giarratana picked "Wuthering Heights," which she downloaded free in Farley Library because its copyright had expired. She charted the 41 appearances of the word “dream,” noting its geographic location, symbolic...
placement and importance to two kinds of characters: romantics and skeptics. Using the *Oxford English Dictionary*, she mapped the meaning of “dream” across centuries and cultures. A workshop exercise became a 12-page paper.

Electronics played a more dynamic role in Davis’ romantic literature class. Her students used iPads to trace the relationship of poems and prints in William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The iPads enabled them to better detect how the meaning of a line can be changed by a semi-colon, and how the intensity of a poem can depend on the intensity of an etching of a tiger.

Davis believes in the power of digital technology to explore illustrations and give context to text. “It’s an incredibly useful approach for teaching,” she says. “It teaches students that they can do traditional research more efficiently, that technology can be your friend whether you’re working from a single work, a whole body of work or a whole century. It gives them more insight into our field; it helps them work like scholars. It gets them excited about research in new ways, and anything that gets them excited about research is a fun thing.”

Images and words are natural partners for Associate Professor Chad Stanley, who plays music, paints and directs the Wilkes Writing Center. An expert on visualizing and analyzing trauma, he has his English 101 students present a paper and a PowerPoint on a traumatic picture. Freshman Jessica Reynoso used online images and reviews to dissect a 1963 photograph of a young black civil-rights demonstrator confronted by two white policemen, one of them leashed to a lunging dog. In her classroom presentation she asked peers to evaluate the photo, which helped her examine how personal beliefs can change the perception of a radical image. She deepened the debate by comparing a photo of soldiers returning from war with a reenactment of the picture in LEGO’s. Words and images are more potent partners in Visual Literacy, a new digital humanities course that Stanley is teaching in spring 2015. His students are analyzing paintings and movies, video games and memes, and both printed and electronic texts.

Kuhar expects that a critical component of the digital humanities curriculum will be a critique of digital technology as a humanities tool. Will visits to online archives discourage or encourage students to visit real archives? Will studying electronic books encourage or discourage them from reading printed books for fun? Transcribing medieval scribes with a Mac can improve their understanding of *The Canterbury Tales*, but can it improve their chances of getting a job as an editor?

Hamill capped the Chaucer course by taking students to the Morgan Library and Museum in Manhattan. There they saw one of the manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* that they had struggled to edit, as well as other medieval manuscripts, such as the Wycliffite Bible. The trip extended Hamill’s mission to have students engage with Chaucer “not only in the textbook but in terms of how that textbook was made. I want them to see medieval manuscripts as cutting edge and as significant as their iPads.”

Giarratano considers herself one of Hamill’s pilgrims on the electronic pike. Indeed, she traveled beyond the online *Middle English Dictionary* while she was creating her own mini-Miller’s *Tale*. She walked over to Farley Library, where she thumbed through a real copy of the book. Turning the pages was a touching experience for the true-blue bookworm.

“I think I’ll still be a total sucker for the Barnes & Noble leather-bound classics at the end of the day,” says Giarratano. “At home I’ll still read a book on my lap. I’ll still pay attention to the pretty pages in my four versions of *Pride and Prejudice*. And I will always pay attention to the editor of whatever I read for the rest of my life.”