Gateway to the Digital Humanities

James Miller, Class of 2014

My project involved assisting in the planning of the Fall 2013 course, "Gateway to the Digital Humanities", which will be taught as a part of Bowdoin's Digital and Computational Studies Initiative. The research was completed collaboratively in a team of three professors (Professor Fletcher (Art History), Professor Chown (Computer Science) and Professor Hall (Post Doctoral Fellow for the Humanities)) and two students (Evan Hoyt on a Gibbons Summer Research Internship grant, and me, James Miller, on a Mellon Summer Internship Grant). The larger team was useful in providing adequate coverage to the concerns of both the humanists and computer scientists while also allowing us to more effectively demystify the nebulous landscape of the digital humanities.

The digital humanities could be viewed as an interdisciplinary field in which the traditional humanities research, such as close reading and interpretation of sources, is combined with computational processes. Examples of some digital humanities projects include Anne Kelly Knowles using GIS technology to reconstruct General Lee’s view of Gettysburg\(^1\) or Robert Nelson using the technique of topic modeling to gain insight on Civil War Richmond.\(^2\) Although a precise definition of 'digital humanities' has been found to be difficult to agree on, viewing it as a methodology for research has been useful for framing the course content. Students in the course will see the digital humanities as a means of raising and answering new and exciting questions.

The project consisted of finding digital humanities projects, useful tools, syllabi for similar courses, salient readings and other useful data that could be used in the creation of the course. Our findings were catalogued into written reports. Reports for a project or tool typically recorded a short description and an evaluation. For projects specifically, we wrote information about their scholarly significance, which evaluated the clarity and usefulness of the results. For tools, we wrote tutorials on the installation process and the functionality of the tool. The reports were recorded on a wiki: an electronic set of collaboratively editable pages. Our findings were used in weekly meetings in which our group discussed what would be best to implement in the course.

The product of our research has loosely been integrated into the syllabus for the course. The reports and evaluations stored on the wiki are accessible to members of the Bowdoin community. During the life of the course, the wiki will be opened to students who can view, create and edit reports for use in their own final research projects in the course. In addition to the wiki, Evan and I also tested the assignments and readings to provide a student perspective in the course design.

Faculty Mentor: Pamela Fletcher

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