

The Intersection of Digital Humanities and Italian Studies

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The digital humanities field is rising in popularity, relevance, and importance, but what, exactly, is it? Technically put, it is the application of computational thinking (formulaic expression of problems and solutions) and methods (coding, algorithms) to humanities topics such as literature and history. It is using, manipulating, and analyzing metadata (data that gives information on other data) to both ask and answer questions of study. Digital humanities is a dynamic field with no set rules, and, as I explored this summer with four of my Italian Studies professors, equally encourages creativity and pragmatism.

I first worked with Professor Crystal Hall on visualizing data taken from Dante Today, a crowd-sourced website curated by another Italian Studies professor with whom I worked, Arielle Saiber, that displays popular culture references to Dante Alighieri. Initially, I copied and pasted all of the user-submitted content on the website to a Word document and then converted this file to Plain Text. I then investigated and made several changes to a series of codes that Professor Hall adapted and developed, using this new Plain Text file as the source document for the code. Running this code partitioned the Plain Text file into individual CSV (comma-separated value, a type of Excel format) files that supplied, in this case, textual descriptions from each submission, their publishing dates, and any tagging information associated with the post. Next, running the new CSV files through another series of codes, I was able to visualize the data to illustrate the frequency of tags and other metadata, such as from where users submitted content. These visualizations would help later with my work with Professor Saiber, but otherwise demonstrated how data can be compiled and illustrated to study a question – how Dante’s legacy exists today and how he remains relevant outside of his literary works.

A secondary task while working with Professor Hall was data cleaning and XML markup on Italian texts scanned using an optical character recognition (OCR) software. However, I soon transitioned to begin working with Professor Saiber and her website, Dante Today, and Professor Cooper and the Bowdoin Digital Clip Archive. I spent my time with Professor Saiber and Professor Cooper rethinking tagging hierarchies and vocabularies – how content is categorized – and identifying ways to improve the navigability and usage of both sites. I removed duplicate and empty tags from each site, for example, and thought of ways to rename and create more categories to more precisely describe submissions. I outlined features and improvements for each site, and thought of ways to expand the sites’ accessibility to users beyond the intended audiences. Essentially, I gave myself the perspective of an individual who had never seen these sites before so that I could easily describe to my professors which features needed to be changed or added.

The final project I cooperated on was with Professor Gavioli, investigating different map editing programs that could be used in a future course on Sicily. The goal was to find a program that allowed for georeferencing (comparing two overlaying maps) and simple highlighting to illustrate regions of importance. After exploring several different applications, we decided to use a program called Neatline, which supplied both of these features with extreme user-friendliness. With this program, in accordance with Professor Gavioli’s course, students would be able to trace the course of an Italian author’s life around Sicily, making notes about key moments in their lives and emphasizing locations that influenced their writing. Through georeferencing, students would also be able to compare the Sicily of the authors’ times to modern-day Sicily, observing where they traveled and how those trajectories compare to each other’s through time.

The digital humanities is all about finding connections, and through those connections answers. However, it is exciting to know that more questions were asked during my time working than solutions found, leaving future areas of study mostly uncertain and arbitrary, but worth discovering all the same.

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