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The Great War and the Digital Humanities: Creating a Project and Building a Team

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The Great War and the Digital Humanities: Creating a Project and Building a Team

Abstract
Using the framework of The First World War Letters of H.J.C. Peirs: A Digital History, this workshop will give guidance for team-building and project management, provide examples of Digital Humanities tools and methods that can be used with First World War collections, and outline pedagogical uses for digital history in the classroom.

Keywords
World War I, Digital Humanities, War and Memory Studies, Gettysburg College, Jack Peirs

Disciplines
European History | History | Military History

Comments
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The Great War and the Digital Humanities: Creating a Project and Building a Team

The First World War: Past, Present, and Future

Craiglockhart Campus, Edinburgh Napier University

28 June 2019

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Gettysburg College

- 2,600 undergraduate students
- History major/minor
- Minors in Civil War Era Studies and Public History
- Emphasis on writing and mentorship
- Traditional approach to classroom work
- Strong relationship with Special Collections and College Archives
- More than just the American Civil War (!)
The Digital Humanities at Gettysburg College

Challenges

- No mandate for Digital Humanities
- No dedicated DH center, staffing, or funding

Growth

- Support from multiple departments and division for smaller projects and initiatives
- Freedom to create and experiment
- Opportunities and encouragement for collaboration

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The First World War Letters of H.J.C Peirs

- Around 300 letters, documents, artifacts, maps, and photographs from an officer in the BEF
- Family requested that everything be digitized and made freely available without copyright restrictions
Hugh John Chevallier “Jack” Peirs, C.M.G., D.S.O.

Photos of Jack and his pram, his sisters, and nieces appear courtesy of Will Hall.

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# Beginnings and Initial Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What we had</th>
<th>What we did</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timing</strong></td>
<td>Connected to the Great War Centenary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A great collection of letters from a lively officer.</td>
<td>Story is bigger than one officer. It’s also about a battalion the transformation of the war on the WF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to connect our undergraduates with this source material/desire of students to learn</td>
<td>Prioritized digitization and transcription to make letters as accessible as possible, as quickly as possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full support of the donors to take an experimental approach</td>
<td>Decided to publish a letter 100 years to the day it was written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom and encouragement to collaborate across campus and existing relationships</td>
<td>Created a “dream team” i.e. hired some great students and brought R.C. onto the project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No <em>idea</em> what we were doing</td>
<td>Continued to evolve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Claire Bickers, research assistant
Elizabeth Hobbs, research assistant
**Ian Isherwood**, Assistant Professor
Jenna Fleming, Content Consultant
**Amy Lucadamo**, College Archivist
**R.C. Miessler**, Systems Librarian
Benjamin Roy, research assistant

Past research assistants
Jesse Campana (2018)
Jenna Fleming (2014–2016)
Kevin Lavery (2014–2016)

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Digital Humanities in Practice

Peirs 1.0: Website Development

Peirs 2.0: Project refinement and expansion

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Collaborating with Students

- Students as true partners and collaborators
- Mentorship
- Paid research assistants/interns/fellows
- Guidance for needs of project vs. freedom to pursue individual interests
Using Peirs in the Classroom

- Peirs and his battalion became a means of teaching traditional and non-traditional military history.
- Paper assignments connecting sources to historiography on leadership, gender, morale, etc. Complicate the narrative.
- Battalion battle studies to show evolution of war on the WF over time.
- Discussions about trauma, veterans, narrative, and memory.

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A Pedagogy for the Trenches

- Research trips to England, France, Belgium
- Using social media for outreach and teaching
Why Create a Digital Project?

- Digital tools allow for wider range of interpretation and analysis
- Desire to create publicly accessible scholarship to a wide audience
- Easier to show than tell
- Interest in collaborating across multiple fields and disciplines
- Engage with communities of practice (DH and disciplinary)
What is DH?

Research, teaching, & learning
  about
  literature, history, the arts...
  (the humanities)
  in
  digital ways
  (building & using software, websites, datasets...)
  &
  humanities thinking, applied to the digital

Amanda Visconti, A Digital Humanities What, Why, & How

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The Values of the Digital Humanities

- Openness
- Collaboration
- Collegiality and Connectedness
- Diversity
- Experimentation

From Lisa Spiro, “This is Why We Fight: Defining the Values of the Digital Humanities”
Digital Humanities Team Building

- Research and scholarship
- Archival and special collections materials
- Digital Humanities methodologies and tools
- Logistics and management
- Student collaborators
- Outreach and promotion
- The “in-between” person who holds it together
Project Team Roles

- Who is doing what?
- What skills does each team member bring?
- What needs to be taught (and who wants to learn new things)?
- Who keeps everyone accountable (and how do you communicate)?
- Are you providing credit?

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Project Management

- What do you have vs. what do you need?
- Project timeline – what will happen, when, and by whom?
- Who is your audience?
- Who do you report to?
- What are the goals of your project?
- When is the project over? (Embrace ephemerality)
#thecomputers

- Who is capable/willing to learn the technology?
- Off-the-shelf vs. custom development
- Open source vs. proprietary software
- Tech team members are equal collaborators, not support
Beyond the Wire

- Develop prototypes and proofs-of-concept before going live
- Do a “soft launch” to work out the bugs
- Provide avenues of communication for feedback
- Celebrate the victories (great or small) and acknowledge failure
Presentation and Outreach

- Again, who is your audience?
- Develop an active outreach plan and assign responsibilities
- Maintain an intentional social media presence
- Use conference presentations (both disciplinary and generalist)
- Google Analytics is your friend
Digital Humanities Pedagogy

- Making connections, thinking critically, communicating ideas
- How can you involve students?
- Project as classroom teaching tool with goals-based assignments
- Students as active content creators
- Providing freedom and support for creativity
Thank you!

[signature]

Love to all, Jack.