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UPDATED! Notes from “Archive Lab: Digital Humanities and Literary Archives”

This fall, Professor [Deena Engel](#) is teaching “[Literary Archives and Web Development](#),” a course for graduate students in English and other humanities departments to train in mark-up languages and the fundamentals of web development, text encoding and [TEI \(Text Encoding Initiative\)](#), building online digital literary archives and topics in project management and Content Management Systems. For “Archive Lab,” she presented us with an overview of the course in order to help us think pedagogically and analytically about humanities computing and archives.

About the technologies used in the course, Professor Engel notes, “The students used xHTML and CSS for the first project (research on a specific author); they are using XML, and CSS for the second project (encoding selected literary texts); and will use XML, XSLT, xHTML and CSS for the third project (digital literary archive comprising a half dozen or so primary source texts). All of the encoding is done using TEI guidelines. Some students are exploring additional technologies e.g. PHP and JavaScript/JQuery. All of the students are using an ITS web-server which runs Unix.”

Professor Engel opened her presentation by outlining the pedagogical challenges of courses like hers, beginning with how best to combine real computer skills without sacrificing attention to literary analysis. In her extensive experience with [humanities computing projects](#), she focuses pedagogical attention on: what works, how the texts are to be used, what digitization can offer the project and the scholarly standards the project demands. She also stressed that many issues are cultural, such as beginning with the text editors and avoiding the “black box.”

One key element that Professor Engel emphasizes with humanities students is the separate nature of format and structure. Formatting, the structure of the document and metadata are all separate concerns from the content of the material—typically the purview of literary and humanities scholars. Attention to the structure of the document apart from its content is especially important for literary projects because “structure” applies to formal construction (attributes of genre), as well as to the physical structure of the archival manuscript and the abstract and physical structure of the document.

Professor Engel then showcased works-in-progress by three of her students: Jonathan Reeve, Christina Bell and John Reitzel. The Computer Science department at NYU is hosting and providing support and services for these sites. [Reeve’s site](#) will eventually allow for side-by-side and line-by-line comparisons of multiple editions of the same short story. He is also working on an [annotation feature](#) so that users can make additions and converse with one another, thus democratizing the process of literary criticism. [Bell’s site](#) explores classical poetry and shows what TEI can do with structuring different forms, including conveying meter in poems regardless of the translation, embedding sound files of recitations with pronunciations and proper meter and putting in tags to convey poetic elements. Overall, TEI has allowed Bell to contextualize translation. [Reitzel’s site](#) on George Borrow is the result of partnership with the [Fales Library](#). His work illustrates the importance of the relationships between students in digital humanities and librarians and archivists in special collections. Reeve noted that TEI gives the creator of the site the option of coding the “purpose” of a text – e.g. entertainment vs. persuasion. These options certainly pose more abstract and difficult challenges as well.

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In response, [Professor Lisa Gitelman](#) presented conceptual questions that historicized and contextualized the concerns of Professor Engel’s course in relation to the rise of digital humanities. She described the remarkable structures born from the sensibilities of critical and documentary editing, [as well as traditions of bibliography](#). She asked us to consider the idea of editions versus archives and collections. She also suggested considering digital archive-building on a broader scale by looking closely at databases like JSTOR, EEBO, ECCO and Evans. The current moment in the humanities, according to Gitelman, is similar to the 1950s for physicists—marked by rapid change, collaborative work and the construction of teams of specialists. She sees a matrix of ongoing transition, marked by differences in instruments, questions asked and shifts in the social organization of humanities disciplines (the allocation of resources, reward structures. These elements are in state of change in relation to one another. She left us with an image and two questions. The image: the microfilm window, the entry point for most of the digital material used by literary scholars. Is this window transparent, or ought we to probe it as a type of mediation? Also, in digital collections, there is no representation of what’s *not* there. How should we understand the nature of digital databases as archives, if no one fully knows the whole corpus?

Questions generated in subsequent discussion included:

* **Searchability:** Defining “search” vs. “research”; how to surpass disciplinary blocks in searchability? Possible solutions include crowd-sourcing to change who can make claims on information, enhance accessibility

* **Disciplinary overlapping:** e.g., thinking about TEI as a large [MARC record](#)

* **Preservation:** Bibliographic legacies, subject development; TEI’s legacy and presence as an ongoing standards group; its potential as a mechanism of preservation to document while keeping current (music counterpart); preservation of digital material as a major concern for software engineers – potential for collaboration from archivists and literary scholars? E.G. [Matthew Kirschenbaum’s CLIR Report](#)

* How do **technological changes** alter historical and literary analyses and shape work across humanities disciplines?

* **Copyright issues** and permanent hosting

* **Fusion between archival and digital;** relationships with special collections librarians and archivists

* **Organic archives, open source and repurposing of data sets** - categorizing artistic and scholarly productions; should art be annotated as part of the archive, creating a self-generating archive?

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