ON BUILDING THINGS
Student-Designed Print and Digital Exhibits in the Book History Class

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Book history pedagogy often teaches students the hands-on skills of book production as a means of understanding the social and theoretical concerns of authorship, reading, and publishing. In book history classes students edit texts (Kelemen 160), make paper (Barrett 146), and even read by candlelight (Stam 74). Book history pedagogy has been drawn to this method of combining theory and practice because it allows students to focus on the many different people involved in the creation of any kind of text who have an impact on a text's interpretation. As book history scholarship has become as concerned with digitized texts as physical ones, it seems a fitting time to widen book history's practical pedagogy into the methodologies of the digital humanities and have students experience the communications circuits of online texts as well. In my senior assignment course at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE), as students both develop and reflect on print and digital media, I ask them to replace a competitive, evolutionary narrative in which successive innovations replace outmoded technologies with a model more akin to Susan Gustafson's work, which explains that we should study "verbal media as always emerging, always in flux, and always in relation to one another" (353). By inhabiting roles related to media production students begin to interrogate the ways in which print and digital media inform and influence one another.

This article discusses the layout and outcomes of my senior assignment course focused on the interplay between the fields of book history and the digital humanities. SIUE 's senior assignment program is a nationally recognized capstone experience in which students create large-scale senior projects; in this English department version, the seminar course culminates with a fifteen-page research paper. SIUE is a master's comprehensive university with a mixture of traditional college students living in dorms, commuting students with families, first generation college students, and students transferring from community colleges. The last time I taught the course, two of the students came to SIUE directly from high school, one was a transfer student, four had children at home, another was returning for her second degree, and several were English Education majors about to begin their student teaching in the fall. This is usually the students' first experience both with book history and with web production. The small class size and advanced student level makes the senior assignment course an ideal

environment for pedagogical experimentation. Students are prepared for some of the unconventional aspects of this course even if they are unfamiliar with the content. My version of the course requires students to create rare book exhibits in both physical and digital forms in order to explore theoretical questions about the production, dissemination, and reception of texts in both print and digital forms.[1]

1. The course design won one of SIUE's competitive Excellence in Undergraduate Education Grants in 2008 for its innovative use of the senior assignment.

I hold the class in SIUE's library, a space that is itself engaged with the interplay between print and digital forms. The class met full time in their conference room and computer labs, creating a direct partnership with library faculty that has proved beneficial to students. This gives the students first-hand knowledge of the ways in which print and digital media interconnect in a research library's holdings. Our library's archivist, Steve Kerber, and librarian, Lydia Jackson, provide students with instruction about the co-existence of print and digital resources on site. Although the university's special collections department is small, it holds a variety of artifacts representative of book technologies from different historical periods and some nineteenth-century journals of local interest that I incorporate into the course alongside digital manifestations of similar artifacts.

Students are better able to analyze discourses about materiality and digitization if they produce both kinds of media. As the course's core assignment, student groups apply their theoretical readings to interpretive case studies and create physical and digital exhibits that use the university's special collections for materials and are later displayed in the library's presentation cases. Students design their digital exhibits using Omeka, an open-access content management system for collecting and exhibiting artifacts, developed at George Mason University. Students derive the images for their online exhibits by photographing the items in their physical cases. Like WordPress, Omeka is free to download, but users must host the site on their own servers. The sites are open for public viewing, but the sites' dashboards (or working spaces) can be password protected using students' e-IDs for authentication. Omeka is user friendly and requires very little additional technical support.

Although creating exhibits is perhaps not as hands on as having students bind books or write code, it allows them to participate in many of the interpretive roles we discuss in class while engaging with historical texts. Students become authors as they write original content for the exhibits. They photograph and manipulate images. They edit the work of other students. They publish their content on the web. Finally, they act as audience members for their classmates' work.

The exhibits that students create are themselves meta-narratives about audience, intentionality, and medium. I group course content around three broadly conceived case study themes that have both historical and contemporary resonances—"The Text in Time," "Everything is an Edition," and "Authorship and Authenticity." Each student group is assigned one of these themes to explore in their exhibits. In the latest version of the class, the "Text in Time" group focused on the evolution of slang dictionaries,

starting with Samuel Johnson's Preface to *A Dictionary of the English Language*, which makes distinctions about what words are worthy of documentation, moving through two centuries of content-specific slang collections, and ending with the online Urban Dictionary. Their work considers paths of influence among the slang dictionaries and how the shape of these eighteenth-century catalogs of "vulgarity" compare to Johnson's tome. The group organized both their physical and digital exhibits chronologically, but the physical version of their exhibit privileged the size and variety of slang dictionaries, while they used their digital exhibits to expound more on the dictionaries' publication histories.

The "Everything is an Edition" group explored Walt Whitman's corpus and poetic influence, and asked why his writing has been such a prime subject for digital humanities scholarship. The group was particularly interested in the cooptation and adaptation of Whitman's words, and their web exhibit included more multimedia exploration than the other groups because they provided excerpts from Levi's jeans "Go Forth" advertising campaign and the Woody Guthrie/Wilco/Billy Bragg song, "Walt Whitman's Niece." Both their physical and online exhibits adapted the metaphor of grass, seed, and organic materials to consider how Whitman's words sprouted in unlikely places. The group was particularly focused on the question of how much authorial control Whitman would have wanted to exercise over these later adaptations given that he so carefully crafted *Leaves of Grass* during his lifetime, possibly printing most of the 1855 edition himself and playing a continuous role in the typography and cover design of all subsequent editions.

The "Authorship and Authenticity" students each took their own approach to the theme, covering topics as diverse as canonicity, the censorship of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, fan fiction, and the authorizing prefaces of Frederick Douglass' multiple re-writings of his biography. One student included several examples of books that have been attributed to the same author for years, even though the author's heirs, as in the case of Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, are now writing them. This group's work explored the tenuous strands of authorial control through multiple lenses, and because they included four diverse case studies, their exhibits illuminated the many forms of collaboration present in every interpretive act.

The work of creating these exhibits begins in the first class. In its first version the course focused on transatlantic book history of the nineteenth century, and students turned in their exhibits a week before their final papers. I have since revised the syllabus to address broader theoretical issues related to book history and the digital humanities so that students can draw on their previous experiences in course work and literary interests as they develop their major papers. Students who had previously taken a course in the history of the English language chose the slang dictionaries topic, and indicated that looking at the physical texts gave them a new understanding of how readers interacted with these texts, some of which even included lined paper so that readers could record words they heard on the streets

around them. One of the English education students read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for a class on secondary education pedagogy. She carried her earlier explorations of censorship through to an examination of E.W. Kemble's original illustrations for the novel in her exhibit, which ultimately led her to a rewarding paper topic arguing that the illustrations and Twain's text satirize minstrelsy.

In order to encourage this kind of working freedom for students, the syllabus emphasizes the relationship between theory and practice rather than specific literary readings. In each class period students use a case study to explore one of the themes that they will later use to frame their exhibits. I use books in the library's special collections department and online resources to illuminate theoretical readings from Finkelstein and McCleery's *The Book History Reader* and Erick Kelemen's *Textual Editing and Criticism: An Introduction.* These thematic case studies necessitate conversations about variability, intentionality, and format within specific cultural contexts. For example, one of the "Everything is an Edition" case studies examines various editions of Susan Warner's domestic nineteenth-century American novel, *The Wide, Wide World.* Warner's novel has been reprinted over one hundred times since its original publication in 1851. As a primary example of the American domestic novel in the evangelical tradition, *The Wide, Wide World*'s versions reveal not just the history of the text, but also the shift in literary respectability away from domestic novels like Warner's. As a class, we look at photocopies of Warner's manuscript, examine the first edition, peruse nineteenth-century reprints of the text, study a 1986 scholarly edition of the novel, and examine several online reproductions, including Google Books' black-and-white scans derived from microfilm, Project Gutenberg's HTML version, and several images of the book available on *The Wide, Wide World Digital Archive.* Students need only a basic introduction to the book's content to begin to see the theoretical issues of authorial authenticity, textual manipulation, and social influence at work in the book's many editions and variant illustrations.

Rather than moving through a chronology of technological change, students bounce between physical and digital examples, with special emphasis on new media productions of historical texts. This format helps students question common misconceptions about technological change, such as those Robert Darnton recently outlined in a blog post for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, including, "the book is dead," "the future is digital," and "all information is now available online." Students in this course instead witness the ways in which media mutually inform and influence one another. Our only literary text, Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), serves as a base example of this print/digital interplay. This novel translates the supposed hypertextuality of the web onto the printed page, forcing readers to shift forward and back through footnotes to appendices, at points turning the novel this way and that to read its unconventional print. This novel with no epicenter serves as a meditation on the shift away from the stable metaphor of the embodied book. *House of Leaves*

provides the class with an organic introduction into the study of book history and the digital humanities because it breaks down binaries of material print and virtual web. While in some respects the novel suggests that ordering is futile, the text also sees this quest to "make sense" of knowledge as a necessary human endeavor that is central to our anxieties about a rampant information age.

Smaller activities encourage students to reflect on materiality in relation to both physical and digital media prior to completing their exhibits. After lectures on book technologies and terminologies, students visit the special collections holdings of another library in the region to examine an object that they think may be of interest to their exhibits and/or their final papers. Students visited Washington University, the St. Louis Mercantile Library, and the Missouri History Museum and Research Center. This assignment uses tools of book history: Students develop detailed bibliographic analyses, photograph books digitally, and write a three-page paper that discusses the relationship between the book's text and paratext. This early work prepares students to close-read paratextual details prior to completing their exhibit work and final papers. In the course's most recent iteration I tell students about book history scholarship on a variety of material texts. Students examined railroad logs, dictionaries, graphic novels, and letters in addition to more conventional literary texts. One student subsequently wrote her final paper on the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)'s *Little Red Songbook* because of her success with this preliminary assignment.

I encourage students to apply the same descriptive skill to digital texts. They write a review of an edition of a book represented in a digital humanities archive, paying particular attention to how archives explain their own construction, how they display the books they represent, and how they describe the physicality of these books for their users. Students often notice that some sites include only HTML visualization but not image-based facsimiles. In other cases, there is no information about the book's size or color. Sites rarely represent the fore-edges and mechanics of a book's motion upon opening—details that can explain a book's quality, intended audience, and level of use. Students also consider features of these digital editions that are unique to the medium, such as the capability to use the browser's "find" function to search for a particular word or phrase. In a review of *The William Blake Archive*, one student noted that Blake's art seemed privileged above his poetry because of the emphasis on screen calibration and the multiple comparisons available for individual prints. As with their bibliographic analysis, this exercise asks students to think critically about how the medium influences interpretation.

This textual work comes to fruition when students read Sylvia Plath's *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, a print facsimile of Plath's original manuscript, and develop a rationale, in class, for how they would visualize one of the poems on the web, taking our theoretical readings into account. This activity allows us to discuss the possible benefits and disadvantages of specific approaches to the digital medium, without reference to whether their

visualization is practical. This semester one group argued that a digital image of Plath's manuscript was the only reliable method for displaying the text, whereas another group imagined an encoded text with links to changes made in Ted Hughes's edited version of the poem. The last group was flummoxed by how best to represent the possible orderings of their poem within the context of the full manuscript. Students realized that online editions frequently experience a tension between readability and hypertextuality. The more textual and contextual elements a digital text attempts to demonstrate, the less readable it becomes, as we discussed.

Activities like these, which have students critique, visualize, and manipulate digital texts, put them in the role of scholar rather than student. They establish an ownership of their own intellectual development through building things rather than only reading about them. At the 2011 MLA, and later on his blog, Stephen Ramsay controversially defined the digital humanities as being about "building things." Ramsay's statement was divisive because other scholars assumed he was excluding theoretical approaches to New Media that study rather than manipulate or visualize. I would argue, however, that the most productive aspects of the digital humanities arise when building leads to theorization, and it is this process, unique to the scholarly production of the digital humanist, that is necessary for the undergraduate classroom. According to Tara McPherson, "hands-on engagement with digital forms re-orients scholarly imagination ...because scholars come to realize that they understand their argument and their objects of study differently, even better, if they approach them through multiple modalities and emergent and interconnected forms of literacy" (121). These scholarly realizations that arise from "doing" and "building" are just as valuable for student researchers. Undergraduates need not know every intricacy of the Text Encoding Initiative's standards for sustainable web development in order to benefit from building things. Allowing them to participate in the visualization of rare books will lead them to valuable questions about the distinctions between web and print and the future of information storage.

Ideally, students' exhibit case studies should address how form influences interpretation and vice versa. The assignment guide states, "You should ask a worthwhile research question related to your theme that you answer with the items in, content of, and design of your exhibits." I present examples of the exhibits that students have created in previous semesters and describe my own experiences with collaboration and the processes of organizing and designing a web site. These examples help students limit the scope of their projects. They consider whether earlier students have been successful at manipulating color and pattern in their physical exhibits. This semester students observed that exhibits that present multiple perspectives on the same question are more successful and engaging than those that provide didactic answers.

Groups meet once a week during class. Students decide together how to break up the work and develop a timeline for their project progress. In

their groups, students talk about their work habits, their past experiences with web development, and how they think they might strategize to complete the exhibit work. Their assignment guide includes the strategic plan of a hypothetical group so that students have one example of how they might organize their workload, but they are free to develop their own.

During this period of conceptualization and planning, students often need an additional theoretical perspective to encourage them to think about how an audience will relate to their exhibits. Most students have spent little time considering the implications a public might have for a text's eventual format. Students read Michael Warner's "Publics and Counterpublics," in which he argues that the "public" is a constructed imaginary that "exists only as the end for which books are published, shows are broadcast, Web sites are posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced" (50). According to Warner, media cannot exist without a public, and publics cannot exist without media. Warner argues that we have developed a cultural imaginary of a concrete and defined public made up of individual citizens who are simultaneously reading the same books or newspapers, but the web is challenging the stability of constructed publics through its indeterminate temporality and spatiality. We cannot as easily imagine the bound and limited area of a public in the non-limited context of the web. This is a difficult reading for students, but it helps them to think critically about their own imagined public.

Students explore Warner's concept of public by visiting exhibits currently on display in the region and analyzing how they develop an argument through their visual and textual explanations. In the first course, students visited the Lincoln Museum in Springfield, Illinois. One student observed how the experience of walking through Lincoln's life chronologically with the sensorial influences of sound and image forced her into an emotionally charged state as she approached the final exhibit depicting Lincoln's casket and funeral procession. The final room accompanies pictures of Lincoln's funeral with a life-size replica of Lincoln's casket and loud funereal music which, the student explained, conscripted her into a state of collective national feeling, forcing her into identifying with Lincoln's nineteenth-century sentimental mourners. Experiences such as this allow students to think about the physical exhibit as more than simple image and text.

Students also view digital exhibits, such as *Mark Twain in His Times* and *Publisher's Bindings Online*. These sites have detailed historical and contextual apparatuses to support the digital objects they include, and they provide students with models for considering how they might write for an online audience. After reading pieces from *The Yahoo! Style Guide* and *Writing from the Web*, we discuss assumptions about audience and composition for a variety of media. These guides discuss how to successfully break up text to avoid unnecessary scrolling and writing shorter sentences to interest shorter attention spans. After this reading students engage in a constructive conversation about the assumptions we make about reading and

the impact of format. This is a pivotal moment for analyzing material versus digital environments, and students begin considering how to best engage their audience in the design of their sites.

In order to apply their reading of Warner and their position as audience members to their role as exhibit builders, each group develops an analysis of its audience. They consider who will interact with their materials, what might attract them, and how they will respond. Students, who have passed through the library's presentation space, can imagine other students perusing the cases on their way to the computer terminals and they have developed basic ideas about how to attract this population. However, students also realize that the audience for the web exhibit frustrates their initial expectations. While they can imagine a specific location, time, and even library clientele, they have no idea who might be looking at their website or when or where or if it might be visited. We discuss how their perceptions of technology and its uses relate to their own preferences for material culture. Although these students may use web sources to write their papers, they are English majors who usually prefer physical copies of books. They have also been in a variety of English classes in which professors value print sources more highly than digital counterparts, and so they have developed a skepticism about online media of all kinds that they do not bring to their experiences of print. These conversations allow us both to dissect the concept of audience as historical authors and publishers would have understood it, while remaining critical of the ways that students are imagining and conscripting an audience of their own. In teaching evaluations one student noted: "This class gave me a whole new perspective on audience; I wasn't just worried about what Professor DeSpain wanted. I kept thinking about students in the library and my other professors. At the same time, I knew that I couldn't really know fully what these other people might think about my work, and I started to understand why my intentions were only part of the puzzle."

As students work on these exhibits, they draw diagrams of how items will be placed in the cases and how they will hierarchically distribute data on their sites. This work necessarily involves analyses of the differences between two- and three-dimensional space. Students begin to notice the limitations of the two-dimensionality of the web. Omeka allows students to experiment with visualization and archival sustainability without requiring complex encoding, but its "what you see is what you get" exhibiting templates also greatly limit student manipulation. These templates offer few choices for organizing images and text, and students have very limited possibilities outside of those confines. I provide students with some basic HTML tags in their Omeka instructions, and a particularly well-trained student can easily manipulate Omeka's code, but the typical English major does not have such refined web skills. For the group working on Walt Whitman's multiple editions, Omeka's limitations were particularly pronounced. Their physical exhibit included a four-foot-long paper timeline comparing Whitman's editions of *Leaves of Grass* to events occurring in US history.

Although a timeline is not outside the realm of possibility when working with code, Omeka's exhibiting software does not allow for this kind of flexibility; the best that they could do was write out a less dynamic timeline. This group was also hoping to allow users a space to manipulate the text of "Song of Myself" and create their own edition of the poem by dragging and dropping lines into an order of the user's choosing, but they realized that interactivity could also be greatly limited in a web environment without the necessary technological skills.

Students in the last course noted how isolating their work with Omeka could be compared to the work of implementing the physical exhibits. On the night we build the library cases, students sit around tables sharing paper cutters, holding up the lids of the cases for one another, and running back and forth to the printer as they revise ideas collaboratively and find errors in their copy. The "Authorship and Authenticity" group devised their work so independently that each member developed her own small case study, and yet the communal tables of the library forced them to help one another proofread, develop labels, and position objects in the cases. In contrast, when they developed their Omeka exhibits, they sent all of their copy to one web-savvy student who did most of the work of making their objects viewable. In another group, one of the members was taking the class via Skype due to personal reasons, but even with these limitations this group did most of their work with one basic concept to which all four members equally contributed. I ask students to evaluate these work habits and the complexity of their collaborations after the exhibits assignment is completed: How often did they exchange ideas via e-mail prior to our night in the library? What various forms of communication did they use? How did their face-to-face work ultimately transform their web production as well? One student observed that just as print and digital textual production now seem to work alongside one another and influence one another, so too has collaboration become a complex entanglement of multiple forms of media. In their reflections students indicated that they sent e-mails, used Facebook to share images, exchanged items by uploading them to their Omeka sites, talked face-to-face, looked over paper drafts, and texted as they were completing their projects.

The mutual formulation of the two media also necessitates classroom conversations about documentation, searchability, and sustainability. One of the primary concerns about the digitization of rare books is that unlike their material counterparts, digital editions are more ephemeral. The digital humanities has attempted to address this concern by establishing a set of encoding standards developed by the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), that allows for interoperability between systems and the ability to represent content regardless of technological change. A problem with the TEI standards is that there is a steep learning curve for faculty as well as students.

Omeka encourages students to address questions of reliability and sustainability without participating in advanced encoding. Because Omeka is primarily a space for collecting and visualizing digital artifacts, the software

emphasizes the importance of adding items using Dublin Core, a set of metadata standards used for item description and cataloging. Although Dublin Core usually uses tags like TEI, Omeka simplifies the process through a data-entry interface. When students add an item to Omeka, they input descriptors into catalog fields such as title, subject, and description. Once an item is uploaded to the collection, the other students in the group can access it, and even a user not connected with the class can choose these items to create their own exhibits on the site; this makes it especially important for students to be thorough and specific as they add the Dublin Core information for each item.

Students also enter tags for each item that will allow for more comprehensive searching. As part of the exhibits assignment, each group creates a controlled vocabulary for their Omeka sites as an in-class exercise. Thus, students can see the complications that arise when a team of people who are involved in a digital project aren't all using the same vocabulary and are rarely in the same room simultaneously. The "Everything is an Edition" group had a revealing conversation about how they should tag elements of Whitman's various editions and what language they should use to describe the media used by the artists he influenced. This is an important lesson about human fallibility and manipulation that students often presume does not play a role in their online research. The exercise also has an impact during the second half of the semester when students begin research for their final papers. By then, students have direct knowledge of why they should try multiple databases and experiment with a variety of search terms because they also participate in the process of cataloging and tagging. In final evaluations, one student wrote, "inhabiting these roles made me much more consciously aware of the function and impact of texts, both scholarly and non-scholarly."

Questions of textual manipulation also arise as we discuss the process of digitization itself. Using digital cameras, students experiment with the best angles, lighting, and backdrops. Students also learn how to optimize images for the web while still retaining the quality of the original file, and we discuss best archival practices for storing original data. A number of questions result from this practice: How does their image work relate to the physical object? What about the physical object can and cannot be conveyed digitally? What new characteristics does this object accrue through digitization? After their sites are completed we discuss comparative image quality and what that might mean for some of the texts displayed. The "Text in Time" group had a range of image angles, perspectives, and sizes in their finished site, and students discussed what was lost and gained via these digitization practices and decisions. This group noted in their evaluations that they should have developed a best-practice strategy for photography just as they had for tagging.

The success of this assignment depends on students constantly connecting their reading to their experiences with the exhibit and back again. At the course's end, students reconsider the similarities and differences

between digital and print media. They use Robert Darnton's idea of the communications circuit to create a visual map of the roles they inhabited as they developed their exhibits, drawing arrows to represent points of contact between their work and the work of other students. These become very complex graphics that are not nearly as clean as Darnton's circular route from author to reader. This allows students to begin to ask deeper questions about historical texts too, and how every book has a story of production and reception worthy of examination. In the resulting conversation, most students agree that web production is more complicated and collaborative than they had imagined. They also note that, contrary to the myth of the web as a limitless space for visualization, most software built for ease of use inhibits the possibilities for displaying materials more than a physical space ever could.

This book history/digital humanities classroom ultimately gives students a more complex critical perspective of both physical and digital texts and breaks down easy print/digital binaries. One student explained, "learning about the practice of textual editing and the manner in which texts have evolved made me newly conscious of the various aspects of the process both online and in books. It made me more attentive to the roles I was assuming and reminded me to also be attentive to my audience. I've never written for an audience before, and it made me develop an entirely new style knowing that the Omeka exhibits would ultimately go live." Classroom projects that encourage students to consider the crossover of print and digital media disrupt the myth of the internet as a space devoid of responsibility and human intervention. Involving students in the analysis of digital artifacts and in the process of creating their own digital projects gives them direct insight into the multiple participants who are involved in the formation of a text's meaning, even as it challenges students' perceptions of a straightforward technological progression from print to digital media.

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