

Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities at MacEwan

*Dr. Sean Hannan
Assistant Professor
Humanities Department
MacEwan University*

A digital humanities mandate stands as part of my job description here in the Humanities Department at MacEwan. Rather than circumscribing all of our goals in advance, the point of the mandate is to experiment with the use of digital resources in both the research and (especially) the teaching we do across the Humanities, ranging from Classics to History to Philosophy to all of the various languages we offer. Given that MacEwan makes serving students its institutional priority, it's no surprise that much of the digital work we do in the Humanities takes the shape of digital pedagogy. In what follows, I'll aim to describe some of the new pedagogical experiments we've been testing out in our department, in order to highlight the many successes (and one or two shortcomings) we've seen when introducing students to digital resources in the classroom.

My own educational background prepared me well for the kind of work we do here at MacEwan. While my doctoral studies included a hefty amount of traditional research into the history of ancient Christianity (and my favourite ancient Christian: Augustine of Hippo), I also made sure to gain experience in fields that spoke more directly to the twenty-first century. To that end, I served part-time as a data analyst for the university administration's alumni affairs arm, which taught me how to properly prepare databases (via data-tuning) so that they can better inform institution-wide decisions. In addition to that job, I also worked as a departmental research fellow, contributing to the visualization of well-researched timelines concerning the history of my alma mater. This second experience taught me that digital work didn't necessarily have to begin and end with pure data. Interactive, visually compelling end-products could actually help bring history alive for students, alumni, and anyone else who happened to stumble upon the relevant website.

At MacEwan, I have aimed to bring these experiences in analysis and visualization to bear upon how we teach in the classroom. In the Fall semester of 2016, I launched a trial balloon by including digital mapping exercises among the exercises in History 205: Medieval Europe. Using Google's [MyMaps](#), students were able to create custom maps of historical locations, placing them onto their proper topographical sites. Or, if they preferred, they could place them amidst current political borders, in order to see how such boundary markers are bound to shift over the centuries and even millennia. In addition to simply conducting these assignments, it seemed like a wise idea to ask for extra feedback from students. When asked how they felt about the inclusion of digital mapping assignments, most students tended to respond quite positively. The only major complaint, in fact, was that the mapping assignments were too easy! Greater variety and a higher level of difficulty turned out to be in high demand.

Keeping that demand for increased engagement in mind, I upped the ante with my Winter 2017 section of History 101 ("everything up until 1500 CE"). On top of mapping assignments, I also included timeline and textual analysis assignments. For the timelines, we used [TimelineJS](#) from Knightlab. While it is far from perfect—it is probably the most challenging program I had students use this year—TimelineJS produces visually impressive results, which most students found to be helpful in internalizing historical images, events, and (every historian's dream) dates. For textual analysis, we turned to [Voyant Tools](#), a program with Canadian roots (which is always

appreciated). Here the trick was to figure out what students could add to Voyant's immense power to take in primary sources as input and then provide quantified data about those sources' vocabulary as output. In this case, I found it very helpful to have students not simply use Voyant, but also write up a short reflection on how such quantification of textual data changed their own qualitative perceptions of the primary sources. Approaching the assignment this way allowed our class to engage with the digital humanities while still clearly making use of their writing and critical thinking skills.

Digital pedagogy is not just for lower-level courses, of course. In my Winter 2017 section of History 476—which dealt with theories of time in the ancient world—we made use of two other kinds of digital tools: podcasts and apps. Peter Adamson's [*History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps*](#) podcast gave students a way to add to their understanding of difficult authors from antiquity, ranging from Plato and Aristotle to Plotinus and Augustine. Asking students to write short reflections on how the podcast altered their approach to these classical texts allowed our class to (once again) bring together writing, critical thinking, and digital skills. We also included a similar assignment that asked students to reflect on the degree to which Villanova University's [*app-version of Augustine's Confessions*](#) helped them make sense of a rather large and unwieldy masterwork. Once these reflection exercises were combined with further feedback data concerning the use of digital resources more broadly, it became clear that digital pedagogy could continue to be effective in upper-level coursework. Looking ahead, we are also hoping to prove a similar point with interdisciplinary work, as we plan to oversee capstone projects for students interested in both Computer Science and the Humanities. The trick, as always, will be to calibrate the use of digital resources to the themes of the class and the level of sophistication involved. Straightforward mapping assignments may work better in History 101 than History 476, but our use of podcasts and apps showed that other forms of digital media can still have a very productive role to play.

While the benefit to students in the classroom is of primary importance here, it might be worthwhile to end with a few points about how the digital humanities can benefit the MacEwan community as a whole. Data-analysis can obviously be useful within historical research itself, as the assortment of assignments above aimed to show. But it can also be useful when we instructors and administrators are trying to take stock of pedagogical effectiveness within a post-secondary framework. By acquiring as much extra feedback from students as possible, we can build up datasets that will benefit not just one or two classes, but MacEwan as a whole. Breaking all that data down and then building it back up via visualizations, we would be able to arrive at a better appreciation of how our assignment designs are actually helping students learn more effectively. To that end, beyond simply keeping track of all the data I've accumulated across these classes, I aim to preserve it in accessible formats, so that other instructors can build on my meagre foundations.

Looking beyond the borders of the MacEwan campus, we can also see that engagement with the digital humanities brings our institution into closer contact with the global landscape of higher education. To take but one example: after soliciting student feedback concerning Villanova's Augustine app, I was able (with student permission) to share quantified and visualized results of that feedback with the original app design team at Villanova. In turn, they have worked with me to ensure that MacEwan students are able to get the most out of their app, which wasn't even available in Canada until we started using it for our course. All of this work being done in the digital humanities at MacEwan thus stands as a benefit to our students, to our institution as a whole, and to our partners in digital pedagogy around the globe.