

Hope Greenberg, CTL, and Melanie Gustafson, History

HST095 TAP American Women's History: The Digitization Project Sessions

Introduction

The Digital Humanities Project: Phase One (2011) had two core components. The first included class sessions that explored the history of American women and, more specifically, the political history of Consuelo Northrop Bailey, the nation's and Vermont's first Lt. Governor. The second component included researching, scanning, transcribing, encoding and creating an online exhibit from materials drawn from the Bailey Papers at Special Collections in Bailey-Howe Library. Six class sessions were used for the second component of the project. The first part of the report explains those six sessions. The second provides an overall assessment.

Part I: The Digital Sessions

Session 1: A Visit to Special Collections

Students attended a presentation in Special Collections led by Prudence Doherty and Travis Puller. In preparation for this session, Travis Puller and Melanie Gustafson selected key documents that the students would be using over the course of the semester.

Doherty introduced the students to the services of Special Collections. For most students, this part of the library was an area they had not yet encountered. She continued by describing the Consuelo Northrop Bailey collection as well as the structure and concepts of such archival collections. Puller introduced the students to the concept of Finding Aids generally, and to the Finding Aid for the Fletcher Family Papers, of which the Consuelo Northrop Bailey collection is a part. He then discussed Bailey, her life, her political career, and her documents. After this introduction students were asked to examine the documents they would be working with. They were given the opportunity to ask questions about the documents and were given the first assignment: return to Special Collections and choose the specific documents they would like to digitize.

Given the large size of the Bailey collection, we decided that we would chose representative documents for use in this project. For future projects it would be interesting to have the students choose their documents, maybe from a larger selection that we make. One solution proposed for Phase Two of the project is to have Teaching Assistants choose a larger selection, do a quick image capture in the archive using an iPad, then let the students consider that larger selection from which they will make a smaller selection based on their research. This will be in addition to their standard introduction to the services in Special Collections.

Session 2: A Brief Introduction to Digital History

Hope Greenberg introduced the students to the field of digital history, the practice of creating digital surrogates, and gave an overview of how we would create the project. She discussed the advantages and challenges of digital history.

This introduction focused on helping understand that, while digital history encompasses many aspects of the application of digital technologies, one of the key approaches by historians is the creation of online collections of historic documents and images. Creating these digital copies of documents, or “digital surrogates,” is not simply a matter of scanning and posting on the web. In order to be useful to historians, or the public more generally, the documents must be made machine-readable as well as human-readable; that is, they must be created in such a way that their contents can be searched, analyzed and shared with other scholars. Hope Greenberg explained to the students the current best practices in the creation of digital surrogates, including the capture of an image of the often fragile document of sufficient quality in a format to ensure longevity and associating metadata to that object. She also explained how, in addition to the explicit information contained in the document itself, metadata can capture the implicit and why creating a transcription in a non-proprietary digital format and encoding that transcription in a standard, non-proprietary, open system that can be easily transferred and translated to future digital use is important.

Based on our student survey, conducted at the end of the semester, we have determined that a general overview of digital history should include more details about the specific steps that the students will be doing for the project. A slightly more detailed timeline that shows what student

the work will be done when would be useful. In addition, students were curious about what the final product would look like. Now that we have the Bailey exhibit in place we can use that as an example to show future classes. Also, we will have the students do an assignment (or assignments) where they critique other digital history projects. This will allow them to see the possibilities for their exhibit and, at the same time, help them better understand what makes a project successful.

Session 3: Doing Library Research

In addition to creating a digital collection of documents, the students were required to explore Bailey's life in the context of the themes of American women's history. To give them the tools to do this research, they were introduced to library research skills by Daisy Benson, library liaison for the History Department. Benson introduced the students to print and online sources for the study of biography and history. Students spent time in this session examining ways to research some of the prominent individuals Bailey interacted with during her political career. That examination focused on using key words that could lead students from the specific person to the larger historical context, or from the context to the person.

Benson introduced students to the Women and American Social Movements website, which became the basis for some of their assignments and was a valuable resource for their research.

Session 4: Digitization Step 1

Hope Greenberg led the first and subsequent sessions that met in the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), Bailey/Howe Library. The documents that each student had chosen to work with were brought to the CTL where the four scanners purchased through the IIG were set up. Greenberg taught students how to scan the documents with settings appropriate for an archival copy. They were then shown how to use their "zoo space" (the UVM server cloud) to store a backup copy of their files. Next, students created an item in Omeka, the online exhibit application. Creating an item in Omeka involves several steps: the item must be given a unique name, the document image files must be uploaded and attached to that item, and the metadata related to that document must be entered. Omeka uses the Dublin Core standard for metadata. This includes information such as the document name, author, date, description, student

contributor, geographical location, etc. There are additional standards for how this metadata should be structured.

Students were given a short handbook (attached) that described each step and included Dublin Core examples. Once the metadata was entered the items needed to be associated with the HST095 collection in Omeka. The students were given an assignment to create a transcription of their documents.

Our graduate teaching assistant, Scott McDowell, learned the technology along with the students and was soon able to assist those who needed additional help.

Given the time constraints, not all documents could be digitized during this session. Students were given the option of returning to the CTL for another non-class session to complete the process. Most students took advantage of this opportunity to scan additional documents of their choosing. This activity was rated highly by the students in the post-project survey. As might be expected, there were many questions about how to craft specific metadata.

This portion of the project introduced what would become a recurring theme throughout the project: experiencing the “messiness” of working with a real archive of historical documents. Students often experience history as a summary text of selected facts and assumptions. Even when primary documents are included in a history textbook, they are usually chosen because they answer specific historical questions. Raw archives, on the other hand, often contain unanswered questions, blind alleys, incomplete documents and tantalizing mysteries. The students quickly realized that while the documents themselves were easy to understand, the details of a life that they represented were not at all obvious.

We helped clean up this messiness by using a chronological framework for the exhibit. Bailey’s life was divided into sections (early years to late career) and students working on the same section were able to compare documents and their research findings while still working individually on their task. The chronological framework was reinforced by the content side of the course, which focused on a chronological narrative of American women’s history.

Session 5: Document Encoding

The digital collection of documents includes an image of the original document and a transcription. This transcription must be encoded (marked up) to make the contents searchable. The current standard for document encoding is the Text Encoding Initiatives Guidelines (TEI), an XML markup schema. Encoding of the transcripts was done using the OxygenXML software program. Teaching the full range of TEI encoding was far beyond the scope of this course so we provided two templates to help students with this portion of the project. Their responsibility was to transfer each of the Dublin Core metadata fields that they had already created for their document images into the appropriate TEI field, then encode the actual transcription of their document. The templates provided a framework for various types of correspondence (letters, invitations, etc.) and a simpler template for other types of documents. Once the document was encoded the resulting .xml file was uploaded to the Omeka item for that document's images.

This session proved challenging. The overview session early in the semester had included some information about encoding but that information should have been reviewed at the beginning of this session. Some students had not completed their transcriptions and some had not completed their metadata, and so were trying to do those tasks as well as the encoding. Learning how to use the OxygenXML software in order to do the encoding was also challenging. While the templates offered an entry point for students there was enough variety in the documents that the templates could not cover all possibilities. Thus, students needed to learn how to alter and customize them. Some were more adept at this than others. Several adjustments would make this phase of the project run more smoothly. We could address the reasons for encoding and provide a review of the process; have the teaching assistant check the items for completeness (transcriptions and metadata) before this session so that we could start at the same point; and provide a better introduction to OxygenXML. Despite these challenges most students managed to end the session with at least some encoded documents. They were offered the opportunity to come back to the CTL to complete the encoding on their own time.

A note about the templates: one of the benefits we hoped to achieve with this project was a collection of documents that could, with little additional work, be folded into the existing digital

collection of Bailey documents housed in the Center for Digital Initiatives. With this in mind we used templates that closely followed those used in the CDI's collection. We have not yet, as of this writing, turned our project documents over to the CDI but we still intend to do so.

Session 6: Building the Exhibit

Once items are added to an Omeka collection (database) they are gathered together to build an exhibit. This exhibit consists of web pages that contain narrative passages along with thumbnail images and links to the related digitized documents. This narrative was built from the research they each did on an aspect of Bailey's career and from the work they did together discussing a specific time period of her life.

To build the exhibit, each group needed to determine and choose a page layout for their section, then add pages to it. Each section contained an introduction to that portion of Bailey's life with links to pages that contained the documents. These document pages also included a narrative piece that described how that document pertained to Bailey's life at that point in time. Group work continued outside of class.

We added an additional session in the CTL so that students could continue working on the exhibit. Once we had all the main components of the exhibit completed, we projected it onto the large screen and began a class critique. We looked at how the different parts worked together, what was missing from the narrative, and changes that needed to be made to the format. The format of the different pages of the exhibit was striking, as students were given the flexibility to format their documents as they thought best. For now, we have left their formatting.

Part II: An Assessment of the Results, Evaluation of the Impact of the Project on Learning, and Description of Evaluation Instruments and Process

It is important to point out that students who enrolled in this TAP class did not know they had signed up for a course that would have digital humanities as a major component. Despite this, only one student dropped the course.

Second, we planned on the syllabus so that the first part of the course would focus on the content of women's history with only a short introduction to the digital humanities component. However, because students knew that they would be working on a large project and would be learning new skills, they wanted more information about the project itself. We understand that we need to better balance content with practice. This can be achieved by introducing and integrating the digital technology experience earlier.

Two of our goals for this project were to increase student engagement by providing an avenue for them to experience the excitement of both working with primary source materials and contributing to scholarly knowledge beyond the classroom and, second, enhance their understanding of the humanities as an active rather than static field of study. The key word here is engagement and, while students complained to the end about the difficulties of such tasks as encoding, they took real pride in the exhibit that they helped create. We discussed how they might link their exhibit to Bailey's Wikipedia page and use their research findings to rewrite aspects of that page. We did not have time during the final days of the semester to do this, but the discussion helped students see that this project – and this history – is not complete.

Two other goals were to strengthen students' skills in technology, information literacy, and digital humanities methods and, second, develop and test an integrated and holistic model for the use of digital technologies as part of a primary-source based research, writing, and digitizing projects that can be adopted by professors in other humanities courses. As TAP students, these first-year students were interested in exploring history or a humanities subject as a major or minor. This course not only introduced them to an important new field, digital humanities, but it taught them skills that they can use in their majors and minors. For those who do not stay in the humanities, the skills are transferable. When we finish Phase Two of our project, where we intend to develop a similar class but with an interdisciplinary emphasis, we will be better able to explore and evaluate the extent to which components of this course might be used in courses outside the humanities. For now, we are pleased that the success of Phase One shows it is transferable to other history and humanities courses. We are discussing with Andrew Barnaby ideas about how we might work with him and the Humanities Center to present our efforts to the larger faculty. This would, we hope, help us achieve our final goal, which is to expand UVM's

capacity to develop a digital humanities component that would be part of the proposed Humanities Major in the College of Arts and Sciences and the proposed Humanities Concentration in the Honors College.

We have attached the end-of-the-semester student survey and student evaluations.