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ASECS 2016

“Student-Scholars and the Digital Anthology”

“Intersections of Digital and Public Humanities: New Media and New Audiences for Eighteenth-Century Studies” (Roundtable)

Built on the eXist database platform, Novels in Context is an open-source XML database designed to provide curated, scholarly resources about the 18th-century English novel in a way that’s conscious of the material practices of knowledge-making. I originally envisioned NiC as a digital anthology with an academic imprint, enhanced with facsimile page images, but it has evolved since then. Today, I see NiC as being about the public, collaborative making of a truly user-generated, hybrid web/print anthology.

A primary goal of NiC is the incorporation of student- and faculty-authored resources in reliable and persistent forms, and to some extent, it is therefore a part of the open educational resources (OER) movement--but it offers a more bottom-up approach in that it is conceptually designed to be student-authored by focusing on description rather than interpretation or evaluation--I’ll talk more about how the project tries to make that happen.

Why?

Broadly, the eighteenth century world was characterized by rising literacy rates and a vibrant, growing marketplace of print that supported the development of a public sphere accessible to more people, if not everyone. Making these resources available on the web is important in and of itself; access is a political issue that, as educators and as scholars of the eighteenth century, we should all be invested in.

While one can find any of these texts on the web, some in quite useful forms, they are often unedited or opaquely edited plaintext; non-searchable facsimile PDFs with unclear bibliographic provenance; or, just overwhelming amounts of text with little sense of focus.

Print anthologies are useful primarily because they offer focused selections, but they don’t offer full-text searchability or page images, and they are less agile than one might like. We may not like the selections, or it be reissued too quickly or not quickly enough. While anthologies can help craft a narrative by putting texts in chronological or thematic order, they necessarily give students little tangible, hands-on sense of the material object they’re reading.

Perhaps the major challenge my project seeks to address, then, is that of helping students make material sense of the thingy-ness of the texts we assign them to read. My students often have little clear sense of timeline, or of the rootedness of a text in a historical moment, or of the fact that a book came into being in specific, material ways. When we pick up an Oxford or a Penguin paperback, it looks modern; the headnotes will give us context, if we have a context to place it

in, but otherwise, everything conspires to take the page out of time and space--without these fundamental physical contexts, the Internet's deracinated illusion of completeness can be disastrous.

How?

Most of my students have little to no experience with the 18th century; how can we expect them to suddenly have a whole material system in their heads? How can we expect our general education students, for instance, to help craft a truly user-generated anthology that is still rigorously edited and therefore useful as more than an academic exercise? By zeroing in, I believe, on the object itself in history. With a clearly defined template and schema that is not primarily evaluative or interpretive but descriptive and definitional, students can have a framework to make real contributions to public scholarship.

If we look at this XML file, you can see what I've done. I've got a header here that describes the publication history of the object--not only the particular text I'm working with, but also the page images I'm working with and its other available electronic iterations, as well. The header also contains information about this electronic version of the text--who created it, who did what part of the creation, what editorial changes were made, and so on.

The rest of the markup, too, is meant to be descriptive and clarifying--for instance, defining important and unfamiliar words, identifying allusions, clarifying a reference, or tagging people and dates to create the basis of a network that may become more useful for the application later. Students can consult reliable materials to identify an allusion, or the birth and death dates of a person referenced, and they can identify the structural parts of a text (title, subtitle, page, paragraph, verse paragraph).

Students can visit a special collections library and take 400dpi, margin-clear photographs of the page images of a first edition, or they can write to librarians requesting such images and public display rights--with a clear schema, a clear template, and objective criteria for the making, these sources can be real contributions to the scholarly community. For our students, their edited entry becomes a point in a line that connects the past to our present moment.

Conclusion

Many digital pedagogical projects have short life spans, or are significant purely in the doing of them. Student labor in the digital humanities is often elided, sometimes for very good reasons, but sometimes for problematic and unexamined reasons to do with power. As teachers, we encourage students to see themselves as a part of an ongoing conversation, but we don't expect them--somewhat myopically--actually to contribute some new thread to that conversation, and I think this is a deep, deep problem.

We face a significant challenge of making distant material relevant for students raised in an environment of standardized, workforce-oriented learning. Part of our work as teachers consists in our attempts to combat this sense of irrelevance and standardization by adopting habits of

active, project-based learning. The future of publishing, the work of learning, and the demands of public discourse are changing, and as teachers and scholars, part of our charge is to ensure that these changes benefit our students' intellectual, ethical, and civic growth.