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Electronic Currents

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Special Collections and a New Digital Humanities Initiative

By Deborah L. White, Pittsburg State University

Leonard H. Axe Library at Pittsburg State University (PSU) in Pittsburg, Kansas, actively seeks opportunities to support student success and learning. In the fall term of 2016, Dr. Jamie McDaniel, a PSU English professor, was awarded a grant from the Graduate and Continuing Studies Department for an Independent Research Project to fund the building of a Digital Humanities Initiatives program. The grant was to be applied to his spring 2016 digital humanities class. McDaniel's goal was to concentrate on the interpretation and dissemination of historical records on a topic called Working the Midwest: Professional Writing and Working-Class Rhetoric.¹ Over the course of the spring term, Special Collections and the Digital Resources and Initiatives Center of the Leonard H. Axe Library assisted McDaniel's class on its project from start to finish, opening up a new opportunity for direct collaboration in support of student success and learning.

Working the Midwest, Pittsburg, Kansas

Pittsburg, Kansas, has a rich history of farming and mining. It was part of the Tri-State Mining district (Missouri, Oklahoma, and Kansas) at the time the mines were at their highest production. The Pittsburg fields between the years 1876 and 1931 were rich in zinc and coal.² The Special Collections Department has several collections related to the Working the Midwest topic, but they are not yet processed and were therefore not good candidates for use in McDaniel's class. The Hearl Maxwell Collection was a good candidate to use for the project because it is small at .4 linear feet, it is processed, and it focuses on business and the mining industry in the local union district in Pittsburg, Kansas. The collection contains correspondence, broadsides, union records and circulars, convention proceedings, photographs, and publications documenting Maxwell's activities as an officer in the local unions within District 14 of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA).³

Nature of the Digital Humanities Project

The nature of the project was to teach upper division undergraduate and graduate students about archives while introducing them to standards for handling and digitizing archives, then opening them up to new ways to interpret and disseminate primary resources through digital humanities projects. The English digital humani-

ties course consisted of 13 students, 7 undergraduate and 6 graduate students. The collection comprises 32 folders, which were divided among the students. Graduate students were given folders with more complex items to scan or folders with handwritten letters to transcribe. Undergraduate students were required to perform five hours of work scanning and creating basic metadata for each item. The graduate students, on the other hand, were required to perform seven hours of work scanning documents, creating metadata, and transcribing handwritten letters. Optical character recognition (OCR) was also performed once all the documents were scanned. Students reviewed and studied the items they scanned, searching for different topics they could focus on for their final digital humanities projects. Topics included analysis of labor, education and class privilege, working-class rhetoric, union activity, mining culture, and document design. The projects were completed using Scalar,⁴ a digital humanities product from the University of Southern California.

Technologies in Digital Humanities

Funds from the Independent Research Project granted to McDaniel went toward purchasing technology and equipment to set up and establish a digital humanities work station within the Digital Resources and Initiatives Center (DRIC). The selection, purchase, and set-up of equipment was a collaborative effort between the IT/DRIC and the English Department. The following equipment and software were purchased or used:

- Dell PowerEdge T110 II Server
- Epson Perfection V600 Photo Scanner
- OmniPage Pro⁵
- Adobe Photoshop Creative Cloud
- Voyant⁶
- Scalar

A Dell PowerEdge T110 II Server with Windows Server 2012R2 operating system was purchased to store all digital files for the digital humanities class. Students scanned directly to the server using an Epson Perfection V600 Photo Scanner, and the files were backed up further to our Qnap Cloud Storage. The Epson Perfection V600 Photo Scanner is reasonably priced, comes with Epson scanning software, and is affordable for small projects like this one.

Before the students started scanning individually, they came to the Digital Resources and Initiatives Center in the library for a brief workshop to learn the basics of scanning. Because many students had varying levels of experience with technology, all of the basics were covered. They were shown how to adjust the setting on the scanning software, where to direct the files, and how to change the dpi setting for different sizes of documents. They were also provided a tutorial with screen shots to use as a guide for scanning and the *CDL Guidelines for Digital Images*, version 2.0 (www.cdlib.org/services/access_publishing/dsc/contribute/docs/cdl_gdi_v2.pdf). Several students who were less confident performed test scans to get a feel for the process. Metadata was presented to them in class, and each received an Excel template along with *Best Practices for CONTENTdm and Other OAI-PMH Compliant Repositories: Creative Sharable Metadata*, version 3.1 (www.oclc.org/content/dam/support/wcdigitalcollectiongateway/MetadataBestPractices.pdf). Each used Adobe Photoshop Creative Cloud to change their TIFF files to JPGs and crop if necessary. Because the graduate students were required to perform transcriptions, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives Transcription Guide* (files.archivists.org/groups/

museum/standards/10-MMA_Archives_Transcription_guide.pdf) was made available by the workstation.

The second half of the project incorporated analyzing the text produced by the scans. OmniPage Pro was installed on a laptop to OCR all the pages with significant text. One student indicated that it was fairly intuitive to use, the cleaner the scan the better the software performed, and making corrections was the most time consuming. Because Voyant operates with a single text file, text can be analyzed paragraph by paragraph, and some students did that for their group projects. But to get a feel for the overall collection and to narrow down its overarching themes, a single text file was created and analyzed by Voyant.

Voyant is a text analysis web application that produces word bubbles and graphs for keywords that appear and overlap in the text. It also provides a more comprehensive reading to identify trends within the text. The students used this tool to support their arguments for their final projects in Scalar. Scalar is a web-based product that permits simultaneous display of screens, images, film, and

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Spacial Collections

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media. Students were required to use a minimum of seven different types of media in their Scalar presentations. All the images were linked from the Hearl Maxwell Collection⁷ using the reference URL. The students gave their presentations to the class, and they are publically available online at the Working the Midwest: Professional Writing and Working-Class Rhetoric website.⁸

Lessons Learned

This was our first digital humanities project. Although successful, it was a learning experience, for both McDaniel and the library. Since this particular class is scheduled every two years, future classes may focus on different aspects of digital humanities. In the meantime, the library will work with various classes throughout the university, and lessons learned through this project will help us provide better support to those classes as well.

Archives are a vital part of our history, and they create unique circumstances when students interact with them. Many of the students had never worked with archives before and were intimidated by the experience. Those students were also uncomfortable with technology and required individual help throughout all of their hours. Five students each required five to seven hours of supervision, which took a lot of time from other work that needed to be accomplished. Future projects that require the same circumstances could incorporate cross-training among students, or the types of work could be divided based on the comfort level of the students. All of the students were grateful for the support of the library during the duration of their projects. Overall, this project was a good

experience and created a working relationship that did not previously exist between the library and the Digital Humanities program.

Notes

1. Jamie McDaniel, “Working the Midwest: Professional Writing and Working-Class Rhetoric,” Pittsburg State University, last modified May 2016, scalar.usc.edu/works/working-the-midwest/index.
2. Randy Roberts and Janette Mauk, *Pittsburg* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2009).
3. Pittsburg State University Library Services Digital Commons, “Hearl Maxwell Collection, 1911–1931,” Pittsburg State University, last modified 2016, digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/fa/10/.
4. The Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, “Scalar,” University of Southern California, last modified June 20, 2016, scalar.usc.edu.
5. Nuance, “OmniPage Pro,” last modified 2016, www.nuance.com/index.htm.
6. Stefan Sinclair and Geoffery Rockwell, “Voyant Tools,” last modified 2016, voyant-tools.org.
7. Pittsburg State University Library Services, Axe Digital, Leonard H. Axe Library, “Hearl Maxwell Digital Collection, 1911–1931,” Pittsburg State University, axedigital.pittstate.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/hmaxwell.
8. McDaniel, “Working the Midwest.”