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Student Research Day

Digital Humanities

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Today I will be addressing the topic of Digital Humanities, that is to say, the use of digital tools alongside tradition ways of learning. I want to talk about how they have been beneficial in my educational career, as well as how they might benefit others. Society is becoming increasingly dependent on technology and digital information systems, so for students to get the chance to learn how to use these different systems is a great advantage. In the past two years, I have gained experience using tools such as podcasts, digital mapping projects, wiki programs and Apple apps. Ultimately, my experience with these digital tools leads me to believe that it will continue to be a successful and fruitful resource for students now and into the future.

Before I get into the experiences I have had over the last two years, I will go over what I think to be some of the most valuable assets that digital tools deliver. Firstly, changing the scenery of assignments is wonderful. The idea that in everyday life people will continually write papers is quite a stretch. So, having a variety of assignments is a great idea because it not only keeps the mind alert and learning but also it gives students the opportunity to use others avenues for presenting information. This alone is a benefit, since some students might excel given these digital opportunities, while others who are not so adept might have the opportunity to learn about them.

The second major asset these tools provide is a variety of learning styles, ranging from the aural to the visual and kinesthetic, which can benefit those students who find it easier to learn with different styles. Such variety can also benefit students in general, allowing for maximum sensory stimulation and retention. These technologies are generally made available by professors to be used by students as a secondary tool for learning. Most of the digital tools used can also be paired

up with traditional ways of studying and learning which, again, can maximize the potential for student success.

Thirdly, the skills required to use these tools are also learned and can be used out in society after graduation. The steps involved in learning them are generally easy to grasp, but their applications can be quite broad. They not only give students the skill to use the program, but also give students access to information and insights they might not have had before. These tools, in my opinion, are beneficial to the success of the student in most areas of their academic and professional life.

Lastly, these different tools can help students understand primary and secondary source materials in different ways than can traditional methods. That being said, I think that these two ways should remain mixed. Using them together allows for the collectively gathered information to be most effectively used by the student.

The university is in a constant flux of technological change, and we as students have already witnessed this shift. Everything that was once inaccessible for students is now at our fingertips, including constant contact with professors via e-mail, BlackBoard, the MyStudent System app, PowerPoint, access to digital libraries and so on. This is why I believe that exposure to these digital tools is important.

It should be useful to talk about a few of the experiences I have had with digital humanities tools. There are ups and downs for each of these tools but in general the pros out weigh the cons. First up will be the podcast. Peter Adamson, in his podcast *the History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps*, delivers an academic yet contemporary approach to philosophical history that attempts to decipher the meanings presented in primary and secondary source materials so that most listeners

can grasp the concepts. Using this podcast as a secondary tool for learning has been successful for me thus far. Not only does it allow me to multi-task, so that I can accomplish things and learn at the same time, but it also gives another view of the information so that I can compare and contrast different ideas.

There are cases where having no prior knowledge is not an issue. For instance, in episode 110, "Life and Time: Augustine's *Confessions*," Adamson provided background information about the autobiographical source. He told his audience about who Augustine was, when he lived, and where he was writing. By elaborating on several key points of Augustine's thought, Adamson gave his listener a basic grounding in Augustine. Towards the end of the episode Adamson also headlines the subsequent episodes that contain a more in-depth look into other topics related to the current one, and in this case the next one was Augustine's use of language in the *Confessions*.

On the other hand, listening to episode 30, "A Likely Story: Plato's *Timaeus*," it was beneficial to have some understanding of the text in order to gain insight into the discourse. However, it still contributed to a deeper understanding of the source materials. Adamson breaks down all aspects of the *Timaeus*, unpacking terminology as he goes, such as, what the demiurge is, what forms are, and how the cosmos was made. The preceding and succeeding episodes give some context about the philosophical mind of Plato, which can also help contextualize the works.

Adamson also employs comedy and contemporary links in order to connect the past to the present. This tactic also keeps listeners engaged in the material, in a way that not only stimulates thought, but also demonstrates how the past can still be linked to today. In one of his episodes he even uses a quote from *Lord of the Rings* (a personal favourite of mine) to make a point. In sum, this tool really helps people who benefit from audio learning in conjunction with visual learning.

If classes are not recorded, having a chance to hear some of the related topic material a second or third time also proves beneficial to the acquisition of understanding on the given topic.

In addition to Adamson's podcast, I have also gained much from an app version of Augustine's *Confessions*. Villanova University created this app, for devices like Apple and Android, which could be easily accessible to people interested in learning about Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE), an early Christian theologian and philosopher. Augustine's *Confessions* was focused on heavily in a recent class of mine, so this became a tool to be regularly used. Using the app as a tool for studying was beneficial for me because it supplements the primary information with commentaries. It has audio recitations of the primary text as well as other fun links to engage the user, such as a quiz, a Latin section, a photo gallery, and even a recipe for a birthday cake. Using technological tools for learning can help increase information intake and understanding, thus improving the grades of the students using them.

Villanova's app interface is very straightforward and easy to navigate. The app also has two different versions of the table of contents and encompasses the works of Augustine's *Confessions* as a whole, providing the information in three distinct ways. The first is a typed translation of the primary text, which allows students to read on the go without necessarily having the books with them. The second is a detailed commentary on each book, which delves into its many meanings (both hidden and blatant), helping clear up concepts that may be hard to understand. The third form is an audio version, which enables students to listen while doing other things. I used the audio the most, as I have many things to do at once, and it was very convenient to be able to click a button and hear the words while I did other things. I also read my book along with the audio, which showed me that there is more than one way to translate something and that each translation can create a different meaning. The added benefit to the audio aspect is that it can

be played repeatedly for maximum retention. The app has proven a useful tool for learning the material.

The extras included in the app are also helpful, using images to convey context and offering study tools (such as the quiz) that can help with retention and recall. The images provide the other side of the text, helping students visualize the time, place, characters and other details about Augustine and the period. The quiz goes through some of the key elements and important aspects of the *Confessions* so that you can test your retention and understanding of the material. This app also provides a few hymns that focus on key people and aspects of the *Confessions*, which adds to contextualization of the material, as well as verbal comments by other students that read Augustine for the first time and had insightful remarks to make about the material. Lastly, the app provided a cake recipe that was supposed to be like the one Monica, Augustine's mother, baked for him, which is just cool even if it wasn't important to the understanding of the material.

In another recent class, we were assigned a digital mapping assignment wherein we had to find ancient cities and plot them on a modern map. There were options to add pictures, background info, road networks, and so on. This was a great project to get the mind to visualize where in the world history was happening. This opened up a whole new avenue of understanding and it encouraged me to search out more information. The idea that modern cities were built on top of ancient ones was in my head already, but seeing it on a real time map really gave me a deeper understanding. The digital map is the closest you get to seeing the real location without actually being there.

Two projects I have done for other classes involved creating a wiki page as well as a web page. These tools were fun to learn how to use and will hopefully have helped me attain a few required skills for my future pursuit of a Masters in Library Information Studies. I found these

both beneficial because they were a great combination of traditional book- and article-reading with internet-scouring for images and websites other than the databases on the MacEwan Library Site. They also allowed for free creative thinking in the area of presentation. It was a nice change from the Chicago Manual of Style and the standard 12-point, Times New Roman font. (Don't get me wrong: I love that style too). But the ability to mix academic critical thinking methods and academic creative thinking methods was fantastic.

Overall, I found all four styles of tools have been and will continue to be successful for me. I will endeavour to use them again in order to gain insight and improve my understanding of the primary and secondary source material relevant to my classes. (This will, of course, take place with permission from my professors and by no means serve as a replacement for their brilliant teaching.). I would recommend the use of digital tools more broadly, so that other students can also gain knowledge they can use both inside and outside of school. I also hope that there will be more opportunities to gain access to more tools and varieties of assignments, as I continue to grow my repertoire in the field of digital humanities.