

Intro to Digital History

Lab for Education & Advancement in Digital Research (LEADR)

MSU Department of History and Department of Anthropology leadr.msu.edu

HST 201 Methods and Skills | Dr. Brooks Winfree | Spring 2024

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The Lab for Education & Advancement in Digital Research (LEADR), is a space where undergraduate and graduate students learn digital methods to create and communicate innovative social science research. Through class visits and individual consultations, students can learn, experiment, and build digital projects using a variety of tools and technologies. LEADR is a project of the Department of History and the Department of Anthropology at Michigan State University.

Google Forms URL: forms.google.com

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In this workshop, we will explore a few digital history projects that capture moments or periods of time in the U.S. West. During this workshop we will do an “environmental scan” of a few digital history projects. Students will find that the projects vary greatly. We’ll discuss how they can be used for research (as well as entertainment).

WORKSHOP LEARNING GOALS

- Thinking about digital methodology in a wider context and its conversation with more traditional methods.
- Increase digital literacy through observation, reflection, and analysis of existing work, a reflection of established digital competencies such as analysis of audiovisual media and digital research for critical making.
- Developing a critical understanding of how search engines and algorithms work, how to use them effectively, and their limitations and appropriate use contexts.

Lab for the Education and Advancement in Digital Research



- Learning how to assess your information needs, identify appropriate digital information sources and finding aids, and recognize when digital and digitized sources are inappropriate or insufficient.
- Help students engage more deeply with issues of digital literacy, and recognize the importance of increasing digital competencies (whether or not students have limited previous engagement with digital humanities or digital research methods).

PROJECT INSTRUCTIONS

Part One: An Introduction to Digital History Methods

- ★ What is Digital History? How can digital methods help or inform historical research? What experience do you have with digital history/humanities?

Part Two: Environmental Scan

Spend a few minutes looking through a few of the following projects.

1. Who created the project? What institutions, groups of people, or other scholars helped to assemble it?
 - a. What voices are present in the resource?
 2. Would you consider the resource a project or a database?
- ★ Encountering the American West: <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/exeaw/>
 - ★ Building the First Transcontinental Railroad: <https://dp.la/exhibitions/transcontinental-railroad>
 - ★ First Transcontinental Railroad: <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/collections/RAILROADS>
 - ★ Picturing The American West: <https://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/picturing-the-american-west/>
 - ★ Railroad Maps, 1828 to 1900: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/railroad-maps-1828-to-1900/articles-and-essays/>
 - ★ Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States: <https://dsl.richmond.edu/historicalatlas/>
 - ★ The Buffalo Bill Project: <http://buffalobillproject.unl.edu/>

If you have technical problems with accessing any of the sites, try using a different internet browser (for example, some sites don't run well in Safari, so try Firefox or Chrome).

Part Three: Evaluation

Students will now examine one of the above projects in small groups. You will be assigned a project to evaluate, as well as the following list of questions.

In small groups, you will now be assigned one of the digital projects from Part One and will answer the following questions. You will use these reflections as a basis for a mini group presentation.

Now, students will form small groups.

Question Set A

- ★ What is featured in this resource?
- ★ What sorts of research questions might this project be used to answer?
- ★ What are the parameters or limitations of this resource?

Question Set B

- ★ What kind of resource is this?
- ★ What's the main feature or argument of this resource? (i.e., what is its scholarly purpose?)
- ★ Is there a mission statement? If so, please share

Question Set C

- ★ Who is the intended audience?
- ★ How is the resource organized?
- ★ How easy is the information to find?

Question Set D

- ★ What kind(s) of data does it use?
- ★ Can you download and reuse the dataset yourself?
- ★ How were the materials collected for this resource? If there are physical materials associated with the resource, where are they housed?

Activity:

1. What are some of the pluses and minuses with digital resources?
2. How did this reflect in your searching of the sites?

Now, **choose one** of the sources and answer all of these questions about it. You will use these reflections as a basis for your presentation.

- Title and URL of the resource.

- What kind of resource is this?
- What kind(s) of data does it use? Can you download and reuse the dataset yourself?
- What's the main feature or argument of this resource? (i.e., what is its scholarly purpose?)
- What are the parameters or limitations of this resource?
- Who wrote/created it (and what are their credentials)? Is there an institution involved? Is it crowd-sourced?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What sorts of research questions might this project be used to answer?
- How were the creators successful? What might you have done differently, and what would that require in terms of research or resources?

Answer all of these and make other notes about your experience as a user. Note anything you find particularly good or frustrating about the site.

You will use this list of questions and observations to brainstorm so that you can edit your ideas into a cohesive lightning talk (about 2-3 minutes).

Part Four: Debrief

- ★ What is Digital History?
- ★ How can digital methods help or inform historical research?
- ★ How have your ideas about history and humanities work changed?

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Adapted by Aubree Marshall in Spring 2024 from Dani Willcutt's Fall 2023 course; from Alice Lynn McMichael's Evaluating Digital Scholarship Workshop and from the article, A.L. McMichael, "Evaluating Digital Scholarship for Critical Thinking in the Undergraduate Classroom," Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy (January 4, 2022).

<https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/evaluating-digital-scholarship-for-critical-thinking-in-the-undergraduate-classroom/>

Find out more via our website: leadr.studio