

Digital Humanities Teaching Statement

I began working with digital methods through working in the Michigan State University Bioarchaeology Lab and LEADR. In the Bioarchaeology Lab, I taught students how to use photogrammetry for research and outreach purposes. Most of the time, this work was a one-on-one approach. The second position where I used digital methods in education was in the Lab for Education and Advancement in Digital Research (LEADR). LEADR allowed me to expand my knowledge of digital methods, research, and pedagogy even further.

At LEADR, graduate students are given the opportunity to lead and instruct classes with a variety of hardware and software in digital humanities. Over the 2023-2024 academic year, I was the lead teaching assistant on seven courses and an additional workshop. I was assigned three classes in the Fall and four classes in the Spring. The courses varied widely in content, from Soviet History to the U.S. West. However, I was able to bring new digital methods and skills to the table for each class. I taught a variety of methods—from a one-day workshop to long-standing projects—including technology and software in a variety of areas such as data visualization, version control, and digital literacy and ethics. Over this academic year, I have taught groups that ranged from about ten students to over 200, in both lower- and higher-level undergraduate courses. Teaching both small and large courses provided insight into what types of projects and presentation styles work best for different size courses and the best ways to engage students in different contexts.

My approach regarding teaching digital methods is to make students feel empowered in the classroom while providing a space for productive failure. Educators cannot assume that students already have a baseline knowledge of technology, which is an unfortunate assumption that several people have regarding the upcoming generations. The traditional students going

through college programs today are typically seen as being “good with technology” because they grew up in a time when technology was rapidly advancing and becoming more and more available. However, this stereotyping can be detrimental to student learning. The educator may think that phrases like “Don’t worry, this is easy!” will help make students feel better, but they may do the opposite. Instead, educators should approach teaching with digital tools as if they were building a skyscraper: create a strong foundation, then build brick-by-brick. This involves creating a space for productive failure, as failure is an inevitable part of learning digital tools.

Reflecting on my teaching experiences, I have found that the most important thing as an educator in the digital humanities is making the material accessible. One example includes making presentations and handouts color-blind accessible and open-access tools help educators understand what colors should or should not be used to make materials colorblind accessible. The most informative experience on accessibility I’ve had with digital humanities methods was teaching ANP 433: Contemporary American Indian Communities with Dr. Heather Howard, a collaboratively produced project that has been running since 2016. Students’ final research project for the class focuses on indigenous community issues and requires building a webpage from scratch on GitHub. Students come to LEADR for four instructional sessions and two work days. The material covered included an introduction to GitHub and version control, an introduction to HTML and CSS coding (using Codecademy courses), and how to code specifically for *This is Indian Country*.

When I was first assigned ANP 433, I was very nervous - I had some coding experience through my work with the Cultural Heritage Informatics (CHI) Fellowship, but I did not feel confident in my ability to teach the material. Since this is a public-facing project and students either had little or no coding experience, my job as the lead teaching assistant was crucial to the

completion of the project. I updated a PowerPoint made previously by Zach Francis to teach students about version control and how to use GitHub as a version control tool. I updated and created step-by-step handouts for students that included screenshots of every step of the GitHub process, from downloading the required applications to doing their final pull request to me. Throughout the class, I gained confidence because I was able to successfully navigate technological issues in GitHub and troubleshoot new code quickly. While stressful at times, it was an incredible feeling knowing that I was able to help students complete their projects.

My inclusive approach to digital methods was only reinforced by my experiences with my other classes, including ISS325: War and Revolution. Together with the professor, Dr. Gillian Macdonald, we made the learning materials accessible by breaking processes and projects down into smaller pieces. We created two PowerPoints to present to the class, one on what StoryMaps are and a second on how to create their StoryMaps using Knightlab. Then we had in-class working days so that we were available for any questions when they began their projects.

Teaching with digital methods is an important yet fun skill for both students and educators to partake in. Using digital methods in the classroom is important because it provides students with new skills that can help them explore their data in new ways and present their research to others; while writing papers is important, papers typically live in a vacuum for only the student and educator to see. Digital methods move student work out of the vacuum and into the world. This can help students learn how to better communicate their work to different audiences. Digital methods and digital literacy are transferable to multiple disciplines, making the student more marketable for jobs or graduate school. On the other hand, using digital methods in the classroom is fun because students have the opportunity to be creative with their work.