Open Library of Humanities

Digital Studies /
Le champ numérique

Research Article

Published: 13 October 2017

Peer Review:

This is a peer-reviewed article in *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique*, a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

Copyright:

Open Access:

Digital Studies/Le champ numérique is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Toward Sustainable Growth: Lessons Learned Through the *Victorian Women Writers Project*

Mary Elizabeth Borgo
Department of English, Indiana University, US
meborgo@umail.iu.edu

This case study offers strategies for TEI-based projects with limited funding. By focusing on the needs of our volunteers, the Victorian Women Writers Project has developed truly collaborative relationships with the project's partners. Contributions to the project's resources have grown out of digital humanities survey courses, literature classes, and independent work. The paper concludes with a brief sketch of our efforts to support continued work by rethinking our social media outreach and our online presence.

Keywords: TEI encoding; feminist DH; sustainability

Cette étude de cas offre des stratégies pour les projets TEI (initiative pour l'encodage de texte) dont le financement est limité. En mettant l'accent sur les besoins de nos bénévoles, le projet *Victorian Women Writers* a mis au point des relations véritablement collaboratives avec les partenaires du projet. Les contributions aux ressources du projet sont issues des cours d'introduction et des classes de littérature en humanités numériques, et de travail indépendant. L'article conclut par un bref résumé de nos initiatives afin d'appuyer le travail continu en réévaluant notre diffusion dans les médias sociaux et notre présence en ligne.

Mots-clés: Encodage TEI; HN féministes; durabilité

By age 20, Juliana Horatia Ewing had published her first children's story in the *Monthly Packet*, "A Bit of Green" (1895). It features a selfish child who learns Christian charity by visiting with his father's patients, and exhibits all of the hallmarks of a typical Victorian children's story. While this sentimental tale was unremarkable

in its time, this short piece launched Ewing's extraordinary career. As the founder and editor of *Aunt Judy's Magazine*, Ewing became one of the most dynamic and influential children's authors of her time. Her most enduring story, "The Brownies," even inspired a new division of the Girl Scouts.

Ewing's work, among other rare and often out-of-print texts, has found a new audience through the *Victorian Women Writers Project*. Since its founding in 1995, the archive has supported feminist literary studies through its innovative approach to preserving nineteenth-century texts. By working alongside groundbreaking projects like *Orlando* and the *Women Writers Project* among many others, over 200 texts have been encoded according to TEI-P5 guidelines. We continue to add more texts, critical introductions, scholarly annotations, and biographies with each passing year. But if the authors in our archive are any indication of our future, the next 20 years will be even more spectacular. In order to ensure the project's sustained growth, the *VWWP* has been developing new types of partnerships. While there is no "one size fits all" solution to developing sustainable projects, the following case study offers a broad spectrum of approaches for encoding initiatives that rely heavily on the work of unpaid contributors. By assessing their needs, we have become better prepared to create and support mutually-beneficial partnerships. This learning process has shed light on logistical difficulties inherent in collaborative encoding projects, ultimately inspiring a more student-centered approach.

Our first step towards sustainable growth was to identify potential contributors who had some familiarity with coding and with nineteenth-century texts. Since its inception, our project has been the result of close partnerships between faculty, students, and librarians at Indiana University. Perry Willett, then Head of Library Electronic Text Resource Service (LETRS), founded the project in 1995 after being approached by an undergraduate, Felix Jung, who requested additional resources to study Victorian poetry, a genre dominated by women. Through close collaboration with Donald Gray from the English department, the founders identified, encoded, and launched new digital editions of rare materials authored by women that had been largely overlooked in subscription-based services. After lying fallow for a few years, the project was revived in 2007 by Angela Courtney, IU's English Literature

Librarian, and Michelle Dalmau, then Digital Projects Librarian. Their outreach efforts ultimately resulted in one of the first Digital Humanities courses taught at Indiana University in the fall of 2010. Co-teacher Joss Marsh, a Victorianist, and Adrianne Wadewitz, then a graduate student at IU, transformed the *VWWP* into a powerful pedagogical tool. Encoding texts for the project as part of course objectives gave students the opportunity to practice traditional editorial skills alongside emergent methodologies in the digital humanities (For more information about the project's founding and development see Courtney et al. 2015).

As a student in this course, I saw first-hand how digital preservation projects can lead to exponential professional growth, particularly at a graduate student level. Learning how to code through the *VWWP* gave me the advanced TEI skills needed for digital preservation projects. This experience laid the groundwork for building my own digital projects and contributing to others. By incorporating digital resource-building into my writing process, I have created publically-accessible versions of my dissertation research. This aspect of my work has made me a more competitive candidate for travel funding and research grants. When I assumed the role of managing editor of the *VWWP* in the spring of 2011, I did not yet know how formative digital humanities would be for my own approach to nineteenth-century literature, but I was (and still am) passionate about helping undergraduate and graduate students professionalize through their work with the *VWWP*.

Since students have been a key facet of the project's growth, we then looked for resources which would help us to expand our partnerships with students at a graduate level. Our research included identifying relevant models for classroom engagement. Many successful projects deliberately target the classroom as the primary site of contributions. The *Victorian Web* and the *Map of Early Modern London*, for example, includes entries written as part of daily class objectives. Graduate-level digital humanities courses taught at IU since the fall of 2010 include the *VWWP*, the *Swinburne Project*, and the *Chymistry of Isaac Newton* as part of a more general survey of DH projects. The courses taught in the Fall of 2014 and 2015 used Scalar to preserve the classes' work. Yet, the first class was a bit of an outlier in its focus on editorship and on TEI. By nature, digital humanities survey courses have little

room for extended TEI-encoding projects. Since most students enroll in these courses without prior knowledge of XML encoding and TEI guidelines, it is difficult to devote a significant portion of the class to technical training.

Learning how to encode seemed to be the biggest logistical challenge for graduate volunteers. When coupled with the fact that most graduate students are also juggling teaching responsibilities and dissertations, devoting time to learning a coding language seems like a daunting task. Until there are institutional changes to dissertation criteria, it's difficult to convince graduate students to engage with digitization projects as an extension of their research because this kind of work is not needed to graduate. IU has taken steps toward changing this perception by modifying the language requirement of the Ph.D. to include code. Positioning TEI as a language prepares Ph.D. candidates like myself to engage with a broader range of critical work, much in the same way that one would grapple with criticism in German or French. As a language, TEI also shapes the way that an encoder interacts with the texts. In my own work, looking for place names has made me more attuned to the role of space in shaping narrative. Encoding creates an experience of close-reading a text that both prepares the text for digital publication and generates new interpretations of nineteenth-century material.

In order to better support work that combined editing with encoding, we had to cater encoding tasks to fit the requirements and time constraints of the classroom. This was a particularly daunting undertaking since many of the books in our current workflow span over 200 pages. With the help of teaching workshops offered through the *Women Writers Project* (Northeastern University) and the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (University of Victoria), we developed different strategies for sharing the work of encoding. In some cases, encoders complete only a portion of the text; while this is well-suited for short-term projects, it's challenging to maintain a level of continuity between each part (and among all of the texts in the repository). Since our encoders have found it easier to work with a whole text, we are gravitating toward adding shorter texts into our digitization workflow and toward dividing encoding tasks into phases. Having several encoders make multiple passes through a text increases chances for peer-review and thus reduces the number of errors in the encoding.

As we worked on strategies to market encoding tasks to graduate students, we also considered expanding contributions to the project that did not require encoding. While this move does not help us expand our collection of TEI-encoded texts, it allows us to develop partnerships with undergraduate students and to increase our outreach efforts. Much to our delight, we were able to partner with Chris Hokanson at Judson College in the spring of 2012 in order to add supplemental scholarly material to the archive. As part of an undergraduate course on Victorian women's writing, Hokanson asked students to write brief scholarly biographies for authors in the collection. These submissions were then edited and encoded by the project's managers.

The greatest challenge that we face during the next phase of the project's development is not a logistical problem but an ethical one. Since the *VWWP* is, and will continue to be, an open-access resource, we lack the revenue generated by subscriptions. To further complicate matters, encoding a 300-page Victorian novel or writing a scholarly introduction to an obscure tract on suffrage requires a significant amount of time, energy, and expertise. We are morally obligated to compensate our contributors for their time, especially since their work requires advanced technical skills and knowledge of the subject material, but we are unable to financially reimburse the project's partners and thus must rely on the good-will of contributors. The citizen science model provides one way to address this issue. By simplifying tasks, projects like *Science Gossip* and *Ancient Lives* broaden the range of potential contributors. Because many hands make light work, labor-intensive projects like transcription can be accomplished in a fraction of the time. More importantly, these projects reward volunteer efforts by positioning contributors as shareholders in the final product. Clearly articulating the goals of the project gives citizen-scientists a better sense of how these small-scale tasks contribute to our understanding of history.

Citizen-science projects have helped us to re-evaluate our classroom model. As Emily Murphy and Shannon Smith have argued, teacher-apprentice models lend student projects focused structure, but they risk reinforcing traditional hierarchies rather than giving students opportunities to join the DH community (2015). The *VWWP* encourages its students to become what Murphy and Smith describe as the

"scholar-citizen," a position which allows students to shape the project's content at both a textual and encoding level. Graduate students in particular have worked with librarians and English department faculty to add new texts to the archive and to make emendations to the project's encoding guidelines. This collaboration between the *VWWP*'s editorial board and contributors has resulted in TEI encoding which more accurately represents the material. From a feminist perspective, the scholar-citizen model adopted by the *VWWP* not only places women more centrally in the literary cannon but also empowers women to be leaders in digital scholarship. Performing both encoding and editorial tasks has allowed junior scholars to actively participate in conversations about encoding best-practices and archive-building.

Though our most dynamic periods of growth have stemmed from close partnerships with faculty, the opportunities to teach TEI encoding through the *VWWP*'s texts are too few at IU to sustain the project's continued growth. In light of limited course offerings, we have explored options that extend beyond the classroom model. Contributors working independently of a class have allowed us to extend our pool of contributors beyond IU. These long-distance partners have revealed the need for more streamlined project guidelines and for continued support in the form of regular meetings to maintain momentum. For our particular project, contributors must find their work professionally and intellectually rewarding. Locating and digitizing texts which intersect with our contributor's research interests attracts a broader spectrum of students. One of our most recent collaborators, Rachel Philbrick (Brown University), has been encoding Victorian classical scholarship as an extension of her dissertation research on ancient Greek literature. Since most of the graduate student encoders will be entering the job market soon, they are concerned that their contribution won't "count" as a publication. We have been working to create a more robust editorial review in order to add weight to their work with the project. Furthermore, we are developing surveys to track how the website is being used so that we can build stronger partnerships with those actively using the collection.

We've also discussed at length how we can preserve the ownership and self-direction integral to the "citizen-scholar" model in non-encoding based tasks,

particularly at the undergraduate level. These strategies stem from undergraduate student-driven research projects. By offering students the option to work with the *VWWP* as part of professional writing courses, we've been working with undergraduates from marketing, business, and events management to create outreach events and internships. Thanks to Rachel Sharp, Evan Garthus, and Katelyn Kass, we will be hosting the 21st birthday party for the *VWWP* in Spring 2017. Research performed by two other groups have shown that students are looking for social media marketing experience. In response to this need, we will be offering a social media internship where students tweet, develop blog posts, and design marketing campaigns. Increasing our social media presence will help us to reach potential collaborators and identify projects with similar thematic foci.

By identifying our contributors' needs and finding models for sustainable growth, the *VWWP* has been developing new methods to expand TEI-based projects with limited funding. Catering project tasks to fulfill the professional and pedagogical objectives of our contributors has created partnerships which benefit volunteers and the project. As we move forward, we will continue to explore ways to support collaboration through coursework, through independent efforts, and through our online presence. In the years to come, we hope to attract an even more diverse range of contributors in order to foreground underrepresented voices in Victorian studies and digital scholarship.

Competing Interests

Mary is the Managing Editor of the Victorian Women Writers Project. There are no other competing interests.

References

Courtney, Angela, Arianne Hartsell-Grundy, et al. 2015. "Second Time Around; or The Long Life of the Victorian Women Writers Project." In *Digital Humanities in the Library: Challenges and Opportunities for Subject Specialists*, 263–75. Chicago: ACLR.

Ewing, Juliana Horatia. 1895. "A Bit of Green." In *Melchior's Dream*, 118–33. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Murphy, Emily, and **Shannon Smith.** 2015. "Productive Failure" for Undergraduates: How to Cultivate Undergraduate Belonging and Citizenry in the "Digital Humanities." Digital Pedagogy Institute – Improving the Student Experience. University of Toronto Scarborough, August 20.