Virtual Exchange Pedagogy: A Digital Humanities Approach

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Introduction

In order to connect students from Wofford College, a small liberal arts college in South Carolina, with students at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt and the American University of Beirut (AUB), a collaborative group of faculty and librarians at three different institutions created a virtual exchange program utilizing tools and methods from the field of Digital Humanities (DH). Wofford College is a private undergraduate institution of approximately 1,600 students located in Upstate South Carolina and affiliated with the United Methodist Church. Al Azhar is a Muslim majority university, one of the oldest and most prestigious Islamic institutions of higher learning in the world located in Cairo, Egypt. The American University of Beirut is a private, non-sectarian institution based on the US liberal arts model; AUB has approximately 8,000 students. The partnership between Wofford and Al Azhar formed between professors that met at a summer institute on Islamic Studies, while the partnership between Wofford and AUB formed through a Wofford postdoc who had alumni connections to AUB.

The students who participated in the virtual exchange from Al Azhar were interested in learning about US culture and practicing their English. A professor at Al Azhar ran the exchange as a student group. The students participating in the virtual exchange from AUB were enrolled in a one-year English preparatory program, so the main objectives were for students to get hands-on English practice. Wofford professors involved their students from classes on Introduction to Islam (Religion), Revolution and Regime Change (International Affairs), Middle East Literature (English), Global Digital Cultures (English), and Exploring the Middle East (an incoming student course based on the Humanities fields). Professors from Wofford were chosen from the pool of affiliated Middle Eastern and North African Studies faculty who showed interest in using the virtual exchange in their classrooms.

The impetus for this pedagogical initiative grew out of a desire to bridge the gap between the local and the global in classes focused on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region at Wofford College. Wofford is a predominately white institution with very few (if any from year to year) students from the MENA region or students who would have had any personal interactions with Muslims. This virtual exchange allowed Wofford students direct, virtual connection with a region of the world less commonly traveled. Al Azhar and AUB students who participated had a glimpse into US culture as described and curated by US students their own age through the digital media texts created by Wofford students. The resulting cultural conversations also gave students at Al Azhar and AUB the opportunity to practice and hone their English, one of the key objectives of their instructors.

The aim of the Wofford professors in using Digital Humanities tools and pedagogy was to flip the power dynamic of a traditional classroom and to enhance student agency. Students created and circulated tangible materials prior to the exchange, becoming the cultural gatekeepers for knowledge transmission. The digital content focused on students' everyday lives and their own culture, giving them a site of authority in order to teach across cultures. In this way, the glocal effect was achieved (Blatter 2013). The result of the virtual exchange has been a greater awareness and interaction between Wofford students and students in the MENA region. This article will describe the intersection between our Virtual Exchange and the field of Digital Humanities and argues that DH tools and pedagogy are particularly beneficial for helping students develop

intercultural competence because the simple, familiar, and readily available digital tools give students a high degree of technical and cultural agency that fosters authentic interpersonal engagement that results in heightened intercultural awareness.

The Digital Humanities Framework

Though origins of the field date back as early as the 1940s, Digital Humanities (DH) as a discipline or field of study remains a relatively recent phenomenon. The world's first PhD program in Digital Humanities was established just over ten years ago, when the Centre for Computing in the Humanities at King's College London initiated the degree program in 2005. Yet in less than a decade, the program has evolved to clarify and reflect multiple approaches to an evolving field. Now the program at King's College is housed in the Department of Digital Humanities, and the PhD program has also been rebranded, offering degrees in Digital Historical Studies and Digital Musicology, for example. DH embraces a wide array of projects and practices – from curating digital archives to data mining vast data sets – and draws scholars and methodologies from disciplines such as history, linguistics, literature, philosophy, archeology, and music, just to name a few.

Many view DH through the lens of specific tools and technologies – grounding it in often expensive and complicated programs that facilitate new understandings of extant corpora. For example, the Visualizing English Print project (VEP), which is a Mellon-funded interdisciplinary project, includes members from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Strathclyde, and the Folger Shakespeare Library. VEP brought together literary scholars and computer scientists, linking the two skill sets. The project uses methods adapted from computing to treat texts as data sets, using computers to abstract elements and analyze form. They see the project as a means not to replace close reading and traditional modes of textual analysis, but rather to "supplement humanist inquiry by locating patterns at scales and across scales not feasible for human readers" (Stuffer 2016). A massive undertaking, the VEP is one of many examples of DH projects which focus on scholarship and the ways digital tools can enhance understanding of specific texts or artifacts.

Alternately, the authors of the "Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0" (2009) argue DH consists of "an array of convergent practices" which attend and adapt to changes in the ways knowledge is created, conveyed, and disseminated in a digital age. This focus shifts away from tools and specific technology and onto methodologies and praxis. Virginia Kuhn and Vicki Callahan (2009, p. 292) take up this stance, arguing that DH offers an opportunity for a uniquely interdisciplinary approach to analysis. By engaging with texts that span a wide range of media (including written/alphabetic texts, audio, moving images), DH provides an opportunity for hybrid forms of critical and creative engagement, bringing together the expertise and methodologies of scholars across fields. The authors contend that this provides a rich layering of both method and practice in teaching and scholarship; they interpret DH as an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to texts and artifacts which does not necessarily require sophisticated technology.

In Digital Humanities Pedagogy, editor Brett D. Hirsch notes the striking inattention to pedagogical practices in discussions of DH prior to the collection's publication in 2012. Only in the past several years have scholars sought to shift the DH conversation away from DH as research and scholarship and forward a discussion of the ways it manifests as classroom practices and the opportunities this approach to pedagogy affords teachers and students. Hirsch contends the bracketing or exclusion of conversations about DH pedagogy serves to reinforce the needlessly antagonistic and faulty distinction between a scholar's teaching and their research. He urges a symbiotic relationship of teaching-research, one that DH makes particularly possible with its foundation in "collectivity and collaboration in the pursuit and creation of new knowledge" (2012, p. 16).

Virtual Exchange as Digital Humanities Pedagogy

Our project approaches the DH field from the perspective championed by Hirsch – availing ourselves of the unprecedented capacity for collaboration and cross-cultural communication which digital technologies allow. Though on a smaller scale, Wofford's Virtual Exchange project mirrors the practices of projects such as Matthew K. Gold's "Looking for Whitman" project, which brought students together from four academic institutions to collaborate on place-based learning and analysis. The instructors involved in the "Looking for Whitman" project generated shared assignments that formed the basis of connection amongst the students. Gold and his collaborators drew on the unique affordances of online learning environments to have students research and then share the connections between their separate geographic locations (in New York, New Jersey, and Virginia) and Whitman's own life and work. Importantly for Gold (and for our project as well), the project was more oriented toward content and connection than working with specific or extremely sophisticated digital tools. Gold (2012, p. 163) notes, "the loose connections between tools [such as linked Wordpress blogs] allowed students to take more control over their online learning environments and to mold those environments to their particular learning styles." The activities scaffolding our virtual exchange embraced this emphasis on student agency and adaptation and utilized tools that were familiar to students and thus easy to use, and that required students to generate their own content in order to facilitate common ground with their virtual exchange partners. The two student-driven components that results from this approach were a Facebook group and a YouTube documentary. Because we also wanted to provide a scholarly and cultural context for their own content, we also created an online library guide that provided all of the Wofford students with a shared archive about the MENA region as they prepared for the virtual exchange.

Methodology

This project focuses on using virtual exchanges as a pedagogical tool to help teach across cultures and to build intercultural competency in students about another culture and language. Students in the MENA region were invested in learning English and US culture and the students at Wofford were invested in learning about the MENA region. The technology of social media and an online library guide allowed the students to connect virtually.

Previously a small scale, informal virtual exchange occurred between Dr. Courtney Dorroll and a professor at Al Azhar University. After two years Dr. Dorroll secured a grant from the Stevens Initiative to expand the virtual exchange and gave funding that helped bolster an in-classroom pedagogical activity into a pedagogical research project. The grant money from the Stevens Initiative allowed the pre-existing Wofford/Al Azhar virtual exchange to stabilize, grow, and professionalize. The grant money also allowed us to expand to connect our Arabic postdoctorate professor with his contacts at his alma mater, the American University of Beirut. We also had several other Wofford professors get involved to incorporate their students with the virtual exchange activities. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured so that responses collected from students could be used for research purposes. IRB helped us ensure we would protect our students' identities, and lessons of ethnography and working with vulnerable populations were also key to this endeavor. Students enrolled in Wofford classes with virtual exchange components were automatically included in the virtual exchange, as it was a key part of the syllabus for the class that semester. Students at Al Azhar voluntarily signed up to be a part of a student group that met off campus to participate in the virtual exchange activities. Responses from Wofford students are the focus of this article.

The research also included responses from students in the Al Azhar discussion section. These students all signed consent forms so that their responses could be utilized for research purposes and they were also guaranteed that their identities would remain anonymous. Throughout the entire virtual exchange, safeguards were put in place to ensure student identities would not leave the confines of the

classroom virtual exchange. This is particularly significant when working with students across different nation-states with different levels of legality regarding freedom of speech, cultural dynamics and social taboos. For example, the mere signing of an IRB consent form proved culturally difficult for Egyptian students (because it might be misread as a document that was aiding the US government or raise flags as to why data was being collected); therefore, we were able to get verbal consent from Egyptian students so as to limit misunderstandings.

In this paper we are focusing on Wofford student responses as all co-authors to this article teach at Wofford College which allowed us to work together to compare and contrast data collected over the virtual exchange on a common student population. Each professor asked students enrolled in their classes that had the virtual exchange as part of their syllabus to sign the IRB (only students who signed the IRB would be utilized for research purposes); there was not a grade or participation penalty for not signing the IRB. However, if students did not want to participate in the virtual exchange, then they would need to enroll in a different class, as the virtual exchange was an official component of the class and the students' participation grade for that semester. Data in the form of student responses were collected by each Wofford professor. We individually analyzed our data, then met as a group to analyze the data at the end of the semester to find compelling similarities and significant points that described the impact of virtual exchange on student learning and intercultural comprehension.

Virtual Exchange Uses

Facebook

We began with a sharing structure on Facebook, a tool with which most students are already familiar, because we hoped to encourage a relaxed and comfortable environment for cross-cultural communication. For the purpose of our project, the digital tools offered a tremendously fruitful means to connection. We utilized Facebook to create a Group Page for Wofford students in a first-year, general education course called "Exploring the Middle East" and with students at participating in the Al Azhar Virtual Exchange student club. Wofford students were assigned to post 15 original posts about US Southern culture, and the Al Azhar students were asked to post 15 original posts relating to Egyptian culture. This was done on a closed Facebook group to make sure only students were participating in the assignment and to protect the identities of the students involved. The goal was to move away from the monolithic stereotypes of "American culture" and "Arab culture" in order to enable students to show intimate, personal family histories and cultural moments from their own lives. Students were challenged to produce content that defied stereotypes and personalized the narrative of culture. A Wofford upper classman, Breck Peterson, worked as a student preceptor (akin to an undergraduate teaching assistant) to specifically lead students in their Virtual Exchange activities for the class. Breck taught eight classes in the semester related to walking Wofford students through their Facebook group assignments.

Online Library Guide

Library research guides allow librarians, in conjunction with teaching faculty, to gather links to a variety of materials relevant to a course into a single, easily accessible website. Library guides are particularly helpful when a course enrolls students working in multiple locations because they provide access to resources at any hour, whether the library is open or closed and whether a librarian is on duty or not, which makes them an excellent resource for students taking part in a Virtual Exchange. The fact that the guide is a curated list of carefully selected items helps students overcome the feeling of being overwhelmed by the sheer number of resources available to them via the internet or their college library. Starting from a guide also assures students the featured resources have been vetted by their professor and a librarian, demonstrating that the quality of the sources is good, which can be a particularly difficult assessment to make for students working in a second language. Students are not limited to only using resources from the guide for their classes but giving them a set of approved materials as a starting point models the kind of scholarly materials professors expect them to utilize.

This library guide (http://libguides.woorford.edu/MENAexchange) was developed in consultation with faculty working on the virtual exchange, with professors indicating the topics which would be covered in the classes and possible areas of student interest. The following topics form the main tabs of the guide: Egyptian and Lebanese Culture, American Culture, Ethnography, Cultural Sensitivity and Intercultural Competency, Films, and Genealogy. In each section, resources such as electronic books, journals, streaming videos, and online articles are featured, often with an explanation of why a particular resource was chosen for the class. In selecting materials, we chose scholarly books and articles from a variety of disciplines, paying special attention to the difficulty of the language used in each source. We perused the national library websites for Lebanon and Egypt to find genealogy sources in English to accompany the US websites. Finally, a grant provided money to purchase several new e-books which are linked on the guide to support the courses. Wofford's Sandor Teszler Library was able to offer the students in Egypt and Lebanon temporary access to selected electronic materials, allowing them to consult the same materials as Wofford students. If the library had not been able to provide access via temporary student status, the guide would have focused on freely available, open-access sources. A common course library guide allows all of the students involved in the virtual exchange to have a shared set of resources in common, which builds a foundation for the class.

YouTube

Using social media is a pleasurable experience because it requires both consumption and production in the form of either content generation or interactivity. The video sharing platform YouTube is not often included in scholarly discussions of social media platforms. However, its fundamental design emphasizes the sociality of sharing, and the scope of this sharing is global. As of 2018, YouTube has over one billion users and their mission language is focused on creating a global sense of community, much like virtual exchange pedagogy. Its widespread availability and user-friendly creator tools, such as embedded video editing, make it an accessible and engaging pedagogical tool (YouTube 2018).

YouTube was utilized for scaffolding activities, developmental, lower-stakes activities that help students build competence toward a higher-skill and higher-stakes assignment, in an upper-division Global Digital Cultures course at Wofford. Prior to the exchange, we asked students to create two minutes of footage depicting their everyday life. This idea emulates the model of the film Life in a Day (Macdonald 2011) which was created from user-submitted videos collected on a YouTube channel and released as a feature-length film. The film's narrative depicts 24 hours around the globe by editing the footage together. Students reported the film created a feeling of both sameness and difference across people, regardless of their background or circumstances. Striving to reproduce this effect in their own documentary film, students collected all of their individual footage in a YouTube channel. They worked in groups to annotate and then edit the clips together to create a representative film about 24 hours in the life of a Wofford student. We then shared the link for this video with the American University of Beirut so that students could view it prior to the exchange and ask questions about everyday life here.

The process of production generated both technical and cultural discussions that never would have arisen, even with the virtual exchange, had students not been tasked with creating a representative digital project. They had to collaboratively determine an annotation structure and a process for editing the film as a group. They ran into several technical challenges that could only be solved by digging deeper into the creator tools and external software to solve their problems. Similarly, they had to work through a variety of opinions about how to represent Wofford and the United States within the video. Because the Wofford students had already learned about and communicated with their AUB partners through the Facebook page, they were particularly aware of how their film might be received. For example, one student included a short shot of the US flag at half-staff. While some students thought this might amount to propaganda if included, others felt that this practice of honoring the dead through such a public symbol was an important cultural norm. Rather than censoring the image, the group decided to keep the clip of the flag in

the final film because it would allow them to discuss it directly in the virtual exchange so that they could understand how particular images were interpreted in different cultural contexts. Working through these technical challenges and differing perspectives within their own culture made them much more aware of the ways in which representation is shaped by both the affordances of the medium and the context of development (Life in a Day: Wofford Edition: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12sWmaT0ggs).

Discussion

This methodology requires technology, and technologies can fail. On both sides we had technological issues. Patience is required, and fast thinking on your feet for possible solutions is very necessary. Time zone problems were also difficult when trying to find a time that worked for both parties. Varying levels of English fluency created comprehension problems. This is not to be critical, as we of course did not have sufficient Arabic knowledge to even attempt doing the virtual exchange in Arabic, but this is a key inequality of the virtual exchange: English being the assumed conversational method.

Strategies that worked very well were the use of Facebook and blogs so that one could overcome the time zone problems in that students could post when was convenient for them on the group Facebook page and time could be taken to edit student's posts regarding the use of English. Skype was at time very effective but at other times very frustrating: internet connection issues, varying levels of English competency, and so forth diminished the quality of interactions. In the future we would reduce the number of Skype interactions and bolster projects and assignments that utilized the Facebook Group interactions.

The feedback solicited from students illustrates how impactful the virtual exchange was for teaching intercultural competency through this type of digital humanities project. Students are asked to discuss their own culture and learn from a peer about a culture that unfortunately, has many stereotypes and misunderstandings in a post-9/11 and post-ISIS United States.

Wofford Student Responses

Student 1:

The most significant change to me was how I viewed the students. The virtual exchange made it so that I view the students more like people, we [have] things in common, and not just entities across the seas to be studied. This occurred partially through the Facebook page but also through an extension of the Facebook page as students friended me on Facebook and we had conversations sometimes every single day and other times every few days. These conversations ranged from the virtual exchange itself to school to the general how our days are going.

It is significant because it is an actual discussion with someone in the region. It is not just reading a book and getting general knowledge but rather getting to know someone and by extension the culture and region they live in.

Student 2:

I found many similarities between Middle Eastern culture and Indian culture (some that I expected similarities, and some which weren't anticipated). I have learned to better appreciate the values and traditions that are followed by the people living there [the MENA region].

I think the Virtual Exchange program with Al-Azhar students was an amazing experience. It is so cool to be able to communicate with people half way across the world. I learned how similar the Egyptian students are to us. Obviously, there were differences; however, the students had a lot in common: love of sports, reading, and pop culture (music, dancing, Netflix, etc.). They were all talented people who spoke multiple languages and expressed a genuine interest in exchanging views and gaining awareness of popular US norms (Indian norms apply in my case).

The Virtual Exchange was so significant and beneficial to gain a better understanding of the Middle East. It is one thing to read a book or article on the region, and a whole other ball game when it comes to actually getting to interact with the people

who live there. (I, personally, am a huge fan of ethnography. I think the information that you receive from communicating with the people is so much more helpful in developing a better perspective of different people globally.) I strongly feel that this exchange program should be continued in upcoming years as well.

Student 3:

I have wanted to be a pediatric doctor all my life and I have wanted to do pro-bono work in the MENA region because there are a lot of incidents that happen there and they do not have the resources to truly help these children. I want to go to the countries that are underdeveloped so that parents can feel like there is hope for their child. I took this class hoping to learn more about how to interact with people from this region and then when we were told that we were going to be communicating through Facebook I thought to myself that I was going to be thrown headfirst into what I have always wanted to experience. I enjoyed seeing their posts and seeing the similarities and the differences that we share in our culture. Also, the Skype sessions were great because during the second one we were telling stories and many of them found the things that we did amusing. I feel like my access to this opportunity was the best way for me to learn about cultural sensitivity because we were told about things that we were not allowed to say. I really enjoyed this chance because personally I got to see how I interacted with people from this region and I learned a large amount about how to be respectful of another person's culture and this has pushed me to really want to accomplish my goal so that I can help people from this region.

I think this is a significant story because it shows that this was me jumping headfirst and getting in early on the future I want for myself and this experience has given me the push to want to study abroad and go to a country in the MENA region. I cannot wait to get to experience this first hand.

I have never participated in something like this before so this was a whole new experience for me and I was very fortunate to get to experience this because it helped me to solidify what I want for my future and has shown me aspects that can help me here in the United States because of the diverseness that is here too and I have learned a lot about how to react to people of other cultures and that there are many differences between my own and theirs and I would love to get to experience other cultures one day too.

The student reflections demonstrate a number of common themes. First, US students were able to move beyond seeing the Middle East as monolithic culture filled with stereotypical characters and connect with their Middle Eastern peers on a human level, with multiple students citing common interests in movies, television, and food that ultimately humanized the people of Lebanon and Egypt. Student 3, for example, approached the exchange with the intention of one day helping "underdeveloped" countries, an unfortunate stereotype of many countries in the region, but the student ultimately recognizes similarities – both positive and negative - between the United States and the Middle East that should make the student a more effective doctor, whether in the US or abroad.

The personal interactions afforded by the exchange were deemed to be far more effective than reading about the region, and some students reported broadening their contact with the Al Azhar and AUB students beyond the confines of the Facebook group. The desire for more interaction motivated some students to explore studying abroad in a MENA country, and overall, increased empathy was reported by most students.

Conclusion

As the field of Digital Humanities is, itself, an emergent collection of practices, pedagogies, and projects, it provided an ideal framework for developing our Virtual Exchange activities. As Lisa Spiro (2010) asserts, the Digital Humanities illuminate a significant horizon because they are focused on "how the humanities may evolve through their engagement with technology, media, and computational methods." Spiro's assertion is

that contact with new forms of processing, or thinking, changes the way in which participants themselves think. The virtual exchange linked students across a vast geographic barrier and allowed the classroom's power dynamic to turn on its head: students became the producers and gatekeepers of the knowledge shared and disseminated about their culture. The most important accomplishment of this project was linking students across cultures and providing a safe virtual space for communication and learning. A virtual exchange can be easily replicated in other classroom settings, thanks to the free and easy to operate social media tools we utilized. It takes a contact between two institutions to get such an exchange going, but it is established, this method can be implemented to connect students from various cultures to have a lived cultural experience that increases intercultural competency.

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