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Mellon Evidence-Based Teaching Initiatives Grant Application

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Course Description: FREN 305: "Six Degrees of Marie-Antoinette: Social Networks and the French Revolution." (Bilis and O'Brien). In French.

In the spring of 2019, Laura M. O'Brien and I will team teach FREN 305, an upper-level course offered in the French Department that aims to introduce students to the historical and literary context of pre-revolutionary France while also familiarizing them with the theories and methods of the Digital Humanities as an emerging discipline. Here follows a brief description of the course:

The men--and women--who made up what we refer to today as the "Age of Enlightenment" hailed from a surprising variety of backgrounds ranging from the halls of Versailles, Parisian caf es, provincial Academies, urban salons, to the literary underground of pornographers and pamphleteers. Starting from the premise that cultural transformations are achieved through social connections, this course will examine Ancien R egime fictional, historical, and political networks as a means of understanding the origins of the French Revolution. In conjunction, this course will introduce students to the concept of social networks as a sociological theory and as a recent digital humanities approach. Through experimentation with, and critique of, existing Digital Humanities projects, students will understand network theory as a means to analyze the social structures of historical actors and literary characters. No previous knowledge of Digital Humanities approaches required.

"Six Degrees of Marie-Antoinette," therefore has multiple aims: (1) to increase students' literary and historical understanding of early modern French culture through a focus on networks; (2) to expose students to the field of the Digital Humanities and to the forms of knowledge those methods produce; (3) to perfect the French language speaking and writing skills of advanced French students.

The course will take place over a thirteen-week semester. We anticipate enrolling 12 students, the cap for an advanced-level French seminar. The results of our experience will be applicable to other courses in modern language departments that seek to combine traditional study of language and cultural/literary content with digital humanities methods and projects.

Pedagogical Goals and Need for Innovation:

Our experience working closely together this semester in FREN 278, "Court, City, Salon: Early Modern Paris, A Digital Humanities Approach," has led us to recognize that students gain the most from DH projects when they first have a solid grasp of the historical contexts and primary sources from which the DH assignments have emerged. Yet, students also need time to become acquainted with the digital tools, their applications, and the specific kinds of questions these can elicit.

In teaching FREN 278, we were faced with the difficulties of how time consuming it can be for students to, on the one hand, engage with early modern French texts, and on the other, understand the value and applications of the DH tools. In this course, Laura served as

an embedded librarian and technical consultant for the students, helping them learn how to use the software and troubleshooting the technical aspects of their applications. In the course SEQs, students expressed the difficulty of having either the early modern content or the DH approaches dominate over the other, with some students unhappy about the progress of their French language skills, while others were uneasy about their understanding of the digital methods.

In terms of my assessment of their work, I found it challenging to grade their progress: their comprehension of the primary texts and mastery of French hang in an awkward balance with their successful participation in and completion of the DH projects. It was difficult to devise assignments that required demonstration of all three skills without overwhelming the students.

Proposed Innovations:

Our aim is to implement evidence-based strategies into the course so that we may effectively teach the three areas in a balanced way. In order to accomplish the course's joint goals—linguistic improvement, better comprehension of early modern literary content, and understanding the value of DH approaches—Laura O'Brien and I will design FREN 305 in a structure that heightens students' "metacognition," i.e., their "thinking about [their] own thinking" as they move between traditional textual approaches to literature and the experiential projects of DH research.¹ Our approach is informed by recent scholarship on the benefits of "effective reflection" pedagogy, especially with regards to experiential learning.² Coulson and Harvey argue that intentionally scaffolding reflective assignments alongside other forms of study helps students become more knowledgeable of and responsible for their own cognition and thinking. The more they gain awareness about their own experiences and are able to articulate their responses about those, the more they learn. In trying to bridge the literary content and the DH approaches, we are especially drawn to Coulson and Harvey's emphasis on the need to implement strategic "scaffolding," interventions in preparing students to engage more productively in their reflective practices.³

Building on their notion of "scaffolding" and the crucial role of teacher intervention in order to "strengthen the nexus between reflection and learning through experience" we have decided to make the most out of our team-teaching collaboration. We structure the syllabus in a manner that takes the time to encourage learning agency early in the process and perfects student "metacognitive" skills during and after the learning experience.

Step #1

To better balance our students' time between primary texts and the DH methods, we will coordinate our teaching of the hands-on assignments and French cultural and historical material in a way that ensures an authentic connection between content and active application. In response to some students' sense in FREN 278 that the DH projects were

¹ Georgiades, P. (2004). From the general to the situated: Three decades of metacognition. *International Journal of Science Education*, 26(3), 365-383.

² Coulson, D., & Harvey, M. (2013). Scaffolding student reflection for experience-based learning: A framework. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(4), 401-413.

³ Ibid, 402.

disconnected from the traditional content of the French classroom, we have organized the FREN 305 syllabus so that our bi-weekly meetings are structured in the following ways:

Tuesdays: discussion (led by H. Bilis in French) of the primary French texts, their authors, historical-cultural contexts, and approaches.

Fridays: discussion (led by L. O'Brien in English with bilingual responses) of the DH texts, platforms and methods, project planning, and occasional hands-on workshops.

Thus, rather than turning to Laura O'Brien only for technical support, she will be immersed in the class, leading a weekly session dedicated to thinking through—i.e., actively encouraging “metacognition” towards—the DH approaches and their connections to the traditional methods of the humanities. From the opening sessions of the course, students will be asked, through conversation and assignments, to draw clear lines between the Tuesday and Friday materials and discussions, without feeling that one approach dominates the other or that we are rushing to squeeze in primary texts and the DH tools within a limited class session.

Step #2

In an effort to further integrate the experience-based learning of the DH project and the linguistic/literary components of the course, we have decided to introduce a *journal de bord* (logbook) activity. Inspired by the scholarship of Bain et al. (2002) that “regular, authentic practice assists in the development of reflective skills particularly when reinforced with formative feedback on the level of reflection that the learner has attained, and coupled with issues-related questions to challenge the thinking, we will introduce fixed journal writing exercises.”⁴

The Tuesday and Friday sessions will be tied together by the introduction of the *journal de bord* as one of the course’s writing components. Building on pedagogical research on the value of “reflective learning,” the *journal* will ask students to explicitly reflect on the methods they are encountering; in this small-scale and regular writing activity, they will be asked to explain the connections (or the difficulties they may have in seeing the connections) between the Tuesday discussions of the primary texts and the corresponding DH methods introduced on Fridays. This approach implements the “Scaffolding Goals for Learning Phases,” as laid out by Couslon and Harvey on the importance of implementing gradual but consistent meta-reflective exercises throughout the course:

- Students must first learn to reflect and reach shared understanding (between learners and teachers) of the role and expectations of reflection.
- Develop learners’ capacity for reflective thinking and metacognition.
- Introduce reflective tools and diverse media.
- Conduct early diagnostic assessment.

⁴ Bain, J. D., C. Mills, R. Ballantyne, and J. Packer. 2002. “Developing Reflection on Practice Through Journal Writing: Impacts of Variations in the Focus and Level of Feedback.” *Teachers and Teaching* 8 (2), 172.

- Provide formative feedback.
- Provide opportunities for learners to increase depth and complexity of reflection.⁵

Students will submit their *journal de bord* every other week, as a means for the instructors to assess how well students are making the links between the course components and how capable they are of articulating the strengths and challenges of the methods we are introducing. Furthermore, the *journal de bord* will be written in French and require students to use the new DH vocabulary and expressions they will learn with each new unit. This linguistic facet will enable students to practice their French writing skills and give H. Bilis more opportunities to focus on perfecting students' language abilities while gaining a regular opportunity to assess their overall comprehension of the course content and monitor the development of their metacognitive abilities.

Solution #3

Building on this first meta-reflective component, we will also integrate a “Process Reflection” section into each of our four DH projects so students can make sense of their experience regarding a specific project—the “reflection in action,” component that “enables learners to develop meaning from their experience [as they] work through issues and critical incidents in order to make sense of their experience.”⁶ Beyond the more general reflections of the *journal de bord*, instituting an explicit “Process Reflection” section into their project reports will generate further documentation regarding a specific experience and application. Drawing from DH publications, we will be able to model how experts in the field articulate their “Process Reflections,” since, according to scholars such as Moon, providing written/textual exemplars can assist learners to understand distinctions between levels of reflection and enlighten them as to how to critically reflect.⁷

As students work on their projects and use the *journal de bord* to reflect on the insights and setbacks offered by the close reading vs. DH methods, they will become more attuned to identifying the kinds of questions and the forms of answers each approach can elicit. They will draw on this *awareness of process* to write up the final “reflective” section at the end of each of the course's four projects, addressing their reactions to and ambivalences about the skills, tools, and conclusions involved in the specific project. For the early projects, we will provide guiding questions to help them frame their reflection on method. By the final project, we will expect them to have a keener understanding of what such a section requires and what sorts of issues it should address.

It is our hope that by implementing these changes in class structure through meta-reflection components, students will (1) see the French literary/historical aspects and the DH methods as more integrated; (2) they will have more opportunities—and structured time—to focus on their French readings and on their DH projects; (3) these small writing assignments will give them opportunities to continue to perfect their French writing and

⁵ Coulson, D., & Harvey, M. (2013). Scaffolding student reflection for experience-based learning: A framework. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(4), 406.

⁶ Coulson, D., & Harvey, M. (2013). Scaffolding student reflection for experience-based learning: A framework. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(4), 407.

⁷ Moon, J. A. 2004. *A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning: Theory and Practice*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

speaking skills which will not seem disconnected from the DH components through regular ongoing practice in written expression; (4) they will become self-reflecting learners with sharper metacognitive skills.

From the point of view of our instruction, these “meta-reflections” will give us a better ongoing sense of how well students are grasping the connections between the DH tools and the French texts. As they learn the new tools, we don’t want the technical side to cause students to lose focus on the overarching questions of the course. We will be able to gauge if students are becoming excessively concerned with mastering the tool rather than reflecting on the value and specific insights of differing methods. The *journal de bord* will allow us to recognize better how students are experiencing the weaving between primary texts and DH methods, yielding better faculty and student awareness of how the learning process is progressing and whether students are losing sight of the fundamental humanistic goals of the class because of the introduction of technical skills.

Assessment of our success:

We know we will have achieved our course goals if students can articulate their reflections on content and method clearly and insightfully in fluid French with accurate vocabulary. In reading the *journal de bord* and the reflective sections alongside their projects, we will understand how students have grasped not just a specific tool or answered a narrow question at hand. Through the meta-cognitive reflections, we will have a clearer sense of whether our pedagogical approach successfully blends traditional humanistic analyses with digital tools in the undergraduate classroom. This experience will allow us to draw pedagogical conclusions for other faculty in the language/literature classrooms seeking to apply DH methods. Beyond the grading of the *journal de bord* and reflective sections of the projects, we will use the following tools to gauge the success of our changes:

- Compare quantitative and qualitative data from SEQs from FREN 278 to FREN 305 as a means of seeing if the new iteration of the French/DH course generally struck the students as more successful and if the complaints from the first course diminished with the second.
- Qualitatively compare the projects and essays of FREN 278 to those of FREN 305, focusing especially on the quality of student argumentation/thesis and their characterization of the connections between the DH approaches and the primary texts.
- Adjust our grading rubric for DH projects and “reflective component sections” according to research on best practices for such assignments.
- Survey the students through a questionnaire specific to the course activities and structure. We will give a pre-course survey at the start of the semester, asking about student assumptions regarding DH tools and humanities data, and require a post-course survey once they reached the end of the term.

Within the survey we will be especially eager to hear about how students evaluate their progress in the following realms:

--perfection of French written and oral expression through *journal de bord* and reflective exercises

- understanding networks in early modern France and their role in causing political change
- using DH methods to ask questions about networks more specifically and about fiction or history more broadly
- understanding “humanities data” and humanistic approaches to evaluating quantitative information
- ability to critique DH methods vs. traditional humanities research approaches, understanding the advantages and drawbacks to both
- ability to articulate insightful “meta-cognitive” reflections on their learning style and experiences