Visualizing Objects, Places, and Spaces: A Digital Project Handbook •

Mapping the Centennial

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Published on: Aug 13, 2021

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Map of the University of New Haven's main campus in West Haven, CT, made using Neatline.

Team

Principal Investigator(s): Matthew Wranovix, Honors Program Director and Senior Lecturer in History, University of New Haven

Contributors

Project URL(s)

Project Website:

<https://digitalhumanities.newhaven.edu/omeka/neatline/show/mapping-the-centennial>

Project Abstract

In Fall 2018, honors students enrolled in HNRS 4472, "Mapping the Centennial: Using Digital Tools to Capture 100 Years of University History," researched the history of the University of New Haven in order to create a digital exhibit for the institution's upcoming centennial in 2020. Students read scholarship on the history of universities in the United States; toured a museum of local history and interviewed the curator

about exhibit design; met with staff members of the university library; conducted research in the university archives; and ultimately built an interactive map and timeline using [Omeka](#) and [Neatline](#). Students wanted to learn how the university had changed since 1920 and conducted research into the history of academic programs, residence halls, sports teams, student organizations, and alumni. The goals of the project were to stimulate interest in the history of the institution, provide students with archival experience, and build a digital exhibit that could be used by the library or the university at Centennial events.

Time Needed

When did you begin this project? When did you complete this project?

Time Span: Summer and Fall of 2018

Length: 6 months

Outcomes

What is the outcome of the project?

Students completed the interactive map and timeline of university history in December 2018 using [Omeka](#) and [Neatline](#). The map was shared with university students, the library, and the marketing department. Although marketing ultimately decided to build a different map using a Google product, they re-used much of the research done by students in the course.

Resources

What tools, resources, programs, or equipment did you use for this project?

This project required an [Omeka](#) installation (performed by the university IT department), the [Neatline](#) plug-in for [Omeka](#), and the university archives, some of which had been digitized.

Funding

Please describe any costs incurred for this project, and (if relevant) how you secured funding for these costs.

At the beginning of the project, I had no experience with [Omeka](#) or [Neatline](#), but the university was willing to use some of the budget for the Centennial to pay an outside consultant to train me in both programs and to compose a User Guide for students. No additional funding was needed while the course ran in Fall of 2018.

Workflow

Please give an overview of the workflow or process you followed to execute this project, including time estimates where possible.

This project is interesting because it shows what can be done by even small numbers of students with little to no experience in the digital humanities. There were only nine students in the course, none of them history majors.

Summer of 2018: Our external consultant came to campus for a two-hour training session on [Omeka](#) and [Neatline](#). Afterwards, I created the [Omeka](#) instance for the project; and designed the course structure.

Late August/early September: Students read scholarship on the history of universities in the United States and reviewed other projects built with [Omeka](#) and [Neatline](#).

Mid-Late September: Students read a history of the university composed for the 75th anniversary; visited a local museum and interviewed the curator; attended a workshop with the university librarian on using library and archival resources; and learned about plans for the Centennial from the leader of our university marketing department. During one class session, our external consultant gave a workshop on using [Omeka/Neatline](#); during this workshop students followed the instructions in the guides produced over the summer. These consisted of two documents, one that walked students through how to create an exhibit in [Omeka](#) and add items, with metadata, to the exhibit; the second described all the steps necessary to create an exhibit in [Neatline](#) and add map annotations. By the end of the workshop, students had added an item to [Omeka](#) and made an annotation in [Neatline](#); the written guides served as reminders of all the necessary steps during later portions of the course.

Early October: Students brainstormed topics and project organization and engaged in independent research.

Mid-October: Students submitted a proposal for their individual contributions to the final project and received instructor feedback.

Mid-October to late November: Students continued independent research; uploaded chosen artifacts (with metadata) to our [Omeka](#) instance; and drafted historical annotations in [Neatline](#).

Late November: Students conducted peer-review of each other's [Neatline](#) annotations and revised their [Neatline](#) annotations based on peer feedback.

December: Students finalized their [Neatline](#) annotations and engaged in a group discussion about the site.

Challenges & Opportunities

What, if anything, changed between beginning your project and its current/final form?

At the beginning of the project, I conceptualized the history of the university as primarily a story about the addition, disappearance, and transformation of academic programs, but the students were (probably rightly) much more interested in the student experience. I wanted to give students as much space to pursue projects that drew their interest so exercised relatively light editorial control; thus, the final map has many more annotations about student dorms and sports teams, for example, than I imagined at the beginning of the project.

We also discovered that maps and timelines in [Neatline](#) can quickly look cluttered, so we had to significantly reduce the planned number of annotations and waypoints to avoid overwhelming the viewer.

The summer workshop and the written guidelines gave me the confidence to teach the course, but I was by no means an expert user of [Neatline](#). The course was a learning experience for both myself and the students, but in some ways that strengthened the feeling of community in the class. When unexpected problems arose, we had to learn how to solve them together.

Is there anything specific you wish you had known when beginning your project that might help other people to know?

I wish I had spent more time teaching students about metadata and had created assignments specifically to assess how accurately they collected it and entered it into [Omeka](#). The university librarian who visited the course taught students about metadata, why it is important, and what each metadata field meant, and students were

taught how to enter such information into [Omeka](#). Nevertheless, students struggled to consistently record the metadata of the artifacts and images they found, especially as deadlines approached. Students thought of the map and their own exhibits as the “real” products and invested themselves primarily in those; since the metadata of their items in [Omeka](#) was less immediately visible to viewers, students did not focus on it as much. With the number of artifacts they were collecting and uploading, it was also impossible for me to double-check the accuracy of each entry. Instructors who want students to focus on this more need to make the metadata seem like an integral part of the exhibit and not merely something that lives in the background. Developing stricter guidelines that promoted consistency and designing assignments, perhaps with peer review, about metadata would help with this issue.

I also wished I had worked out in advance a greater degree of access for students to the physical university archives. While the library was generous with its digital resources, it was much more reluctant to allow students direct physical access to materials.

Next Steps

Do you have any plans to follow up on this project or work on something similar in the future?

I have no plans to work further on this map, but I have already used [Omeka](#) in other contexts, including as a platform for individual student projects in a Renaissance and Reformation course.

Publications & Presentations

The project was presented informally to university students and stakeholders.