

THE HISTORY HARVEST: AN EXPERIMENT IN DEMOCRATIZING THE PAST THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The History Harvest project (<http://historyharvest.unl.edu>) is an open, digital archive of historical artifacts gathered from communities across the United States. Each year, The University of Nebraska-Lincoln Department of History partners with local institutions and community members within a highlighted area to collect, preserve, and share their rich, but often hidden, histories. Advanced undergraduates, working as a team and with the guidance of faculty members and graduate students, "harvest," digitize, and curate the artifacts and stories they collect. The History Harvest project is rooted in the belief that our collective history is more diverse and multi-faceted than most people give credit for and that most of this history is not found in archives, historical societies, museums or libraries, but rather in the stories that ordinary people have to tell from their own experience and in the things - the objects and artifacts - that they keep and collect to tell the story of their lives. The History Harvest, then, affirms the importance of local people, local communities and everyday experience in the broader narrative of American history by providing an innovative opportunity for ordinary people to share their historical artifacts, and their stories, for inclusion in a unique digital archive of what we are calling the "people's history." This new public resource is then available for educators, students and anyone else interested in engaging U.S. history from this more democratic, or grassroots, perspective. This short paper on our work-in-progress examines the experiential learning basis for The History Harvest project and its rationale for democratizing history in a digital age.

KEYWORDS

History, Experiential Learning, Authentic Learning, Digital History, Digital Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

In The History Harvest, an experiential learning initiative led and organized by University of Nebraska-Lincoln to collect, preserve, and digitize the people's history, we propose a community-based model for experiential learning in the undergraduate history curriculum. In this short paper we provide the rationale and background for our work-in-progress. The project has been featured recently in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (December 2012) and the American Historical Association's magazine *Perspectives on History* (January 2013). Overall, the History Harvest project aims to create a new model of undergraduate learning in the humanities that is team-oriented, student-led, community-based and integrated through digital technologies. Furthermore, the History Harvest project seeks to democratize history by creating public conversation about the materials of history and their meaning, as well as through the creation of an online public archive, which makes available new material -- the artifacts of everyday life -- for historical study, K-12 instruction, and life-long learning. To date, we have run four "harvests" with both undergraduate and graduate students in 2010-2012.

2. MODELING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN DIGITAL HISTORY

Grounded in the pedagogy of experiential learning, The History Harvest places advanced undergraduate students in a class designed to plan, run, and execute an on-site community digitization effort. Students work with and within the community, undertake interpretive analysis of the materials harvested, and curate these objects in a web site archive using widely accepted metadata standards. Led by faculty experts and supported by graduate students, undergraduates read secondary works about the major historical subjects relevant to the community's history, and they continually reflect on the process of doing history as they work through the steps of planning, organizing and executing the History Harvest event, then processing and archiving harvested materials. In addition, each "harvest" seeks out opportunities for students to work with local historical societies, museums, schools and other organizations to further the broad goals of the project, support community-based historical organizations and generally cultivate a broader and more sustained interest in historical preservation and knowledge. For instance, students worked with the Great Plains Black History Museum in North Omaha to rehabilitate important archival materials that had been damaged and the Making Invisible Histories Visible summer history program for "at-risk" middle school and early secondary school students. (Teaching Tolerance 2012, Jonassen et al. 2003).

The benefits of experiential and authentic learning seem clear to researchers. Marylin Lombardi has defined "authentic learning" as focused on "real-world, complex problems and their solutions using role-playing exercises, problem-based activities, case studies, and participation in virtual communities of practice." Students immersed in these activities cultivate important skills, including "synthetic ability" to recognize patterns, "patience" to follow long arguments, and "flexibility" to work across disciplinary and cultural boundaries. (Lombardi, 2007) Although aimed primarily at K-12 teaching and learning, David H. Jonassen's comprehensive research on experiential, constructivist pedagogy stresses the importance of uncertainty and complexity in learning scenarios. (Jonassen, 2005) He emphasizes the concept of computers as "mindtools" or "cognitive tools" and through which students develop "multiple mental representations, including structural knowledge, procedural knowledge, reflective knowledge, images and metaphors of the system, of strategic knowledge as well as social/relational knowledge, conversational/discursive knowledge and artifactual knowledge." (Jonassen, 2011).

But historians have been slow to adopt such pedagogies, despite the opportunities that digital technologies afford. In an essay on the future of digital history and undergraduate education, Edward L. Ayers recently called for students to participate in a cycle of "generative scholarship." (Ayers, 2013) He suggested that students build their work alongside ongoing research projects so that their contributions are assessed, validated, and preserved. The fundamental question humanities faculty face is: how do we reconstitute our classroom practices--literally what students do--for the digital age?

A number of digital humanities scholars and leaders, including Ayers, have suggested that we need to experiment with new models of undergraduate education in the humanities. Founder of the Perseus Digital Library, Greg Crane has recently drawn attention to the need for "a new culture of learning" not only for the field of classics, but also more broadly for the humanities. According to Crane, "we need to engage our students and our fellow citizens as collaborators. We need a laboratory culture where student researchers make tangible contributions and conduct significant research." Crane argues, "the crush of data challenges us to realize higher ideals and to create a global, decentralized intellectual community where experts serve the common understanding of humanity." (Crane, 2012b).

Crane's critique of the humanities deserves quoting at length: "Defenders of the humanities claim a special role in training citizens for a democratic society and often have deeply felt convictions about democratizing knowledge and including new voices. The mainstream of humanities research has, however, focused upon virtuoso scholarship, published in subscription publications to which only academics have access, and composed for small networks of specialists who write letters for tenure and promotion and who meet each other for lectures and professional gatherings. Students in the humanities remain, to a very large degree, subjects of a bureaucracy of information, where they have no independent voice and where they never move beyond achieving goals narrowly defined by others." (Crane, 2012a, Crane 2012b).

The History Harvest project is one effective model to achieve these ends. In the project, we attempt to reorganize the learning process for undergraduate students and to provide standing for community members to have a voice in what Crane calls "the republic of learning." The lesson in almost every digital history project has been that people have materials to contribute, and they also have expertise. At each "harvest,"

community-members are invited to bring and share their letters, photographs, objects and stories, and participate in a conversation about the significance and meaning of their materials. Each artifact and the story told about it are digitally captured and then shared in this free web-based archive for general educational use and study. Caring about everyday people's histories - their stories and their objects - validates their experience, which, in turn, has often resulted in an even greater appreciation of, and engagement with, history. (Crane 2012b).

The History Harvest on-site event features student-run digital imaging and filming tables for documents, letters, diaries, photographs, art, and 3-dimensional objects. To date, community members have shared remarkable documents and objects including: homestead family letter collections, railroad timetables, Civil War letters, rare commemorative silver sets, slave-owned cups and coins, church records, business records, rare music sheets, broadsides, pamphlets, uniforms, photographs, and posters. As we turn to the largely invisible archive in family and community collections, we see not only an opportunity to supplement our other archival records, but also to connect what have been long separated domains of historical understanding. Over time, as the digital archive grows and more people in different locales conduct harvests, exciting new opportunities will emerge to work with these materials and create new resources and tools for historical exploration, from curriculum, to audio and video programs, to networked exhibits that link materials across the many harvests.

In the 1990s the animating spirit behind much of the work in digital humanities was democratization. At that time, a small group of like-minded librarians, scholars, technology professionals, and students saw early on that the World Wide Web opened up new possibilities for scholars to communicate not only with one another but also with the public, with an audience largely unmediated by traditional gatekeepers. Their ambitions then were to transform the way history was understood by changing the way it was produced and accessed. In fact, we cannot change the way history is understood without changing the way it is produced and accessed. The History Harvest project seeks to recover this animating spirit in a time of increased privatization and commercialization of the sources necessary to do history and to make good on the promise, long articulated, but rarely achieved, that digital technologies might yet transform the way history, as well as the broader humanities, is taught and learned. It is precisely the hybrid formulation of this approach, blending elements of traditional classroom-based teaching, with more recent calls for innovative, student-led and community-oriented approaches, along with digital and other technology-based methodologies, that has proven so powerfully transformative for teachers, students and local communities.

Finally, as communities explore their common heritage, students and participants recognize the real consequences of history for today. Some communities have had their histories expropriated and abused for generations by state powers, large institutions, including universities, and political organizations; distorted by mainstream media outlets; or simply ignored or minimized by the majority. The History Harvest seeks to address these deficiencies in the mainstream historical record by empowering communities, encouraging dialogue, and enabling preservation without appropriating the past or taking material objects.

In the next phase of the project we will run distributed History Harvest classes at the same time at three institutions. Students in the three sites will build the digital archive, and work across institutions on interpretation, curation, and analysis of sources related to a particular theme. We will conduct research to evaluate the way History students can be trained to work with technical scripting and the way Computer Science students can be trained to evaluate and interpret data in historical context. This interdisciplinary nexus of skills, habits of mind, and communication lies at the core of several unanswered research questions. How do students effectively collaborate across disciplinary boundaries? What sequences of skill and habits of mind work most effectively in each domain? What technical scaffolding is necessary to support such work? Using social media, high-speed Internet connectivity, mobile devices, and social networking tools, we anticipate a high rate of adoption and adaptation of The History Harvest concept. As the project grows, the interactive, collaborative possibilities are virtually limitless.

3. RESULTS AND SUMMARY

Our results, measured qualitatively with student exit interviews and community participant responses, indicate the following: that students undergo a profound transformation in their understanding of history and its meaning, and develop a range of core skills along the way, which are applicable within a range of potential future professional pathways; that there is strong and enthusiastic support from most local people and community organizations for this sort of innovative "people's history" effort and that the History Harvest project often engenders broader local discussions among community partners about the value and meaning of their history; and that digital cameras, scanners and other similar technologies allow for rapid, accurate, and efficient capture of historical materials on site, while the online environment provides a new and widely accessible way to organize and share this "people's history." (see <http://historyharvest.unl.edu/multimedia>).

Through this experiential learning project we have the opportunity to make previously inaccessible materials visible and usable. Just as important, we see the History Harvest as a way to open up and make more accessible who is included in our history. Alongside this ambitious goal we propose reorganizing the undergraduate experience in the humanities by building a collective research project for undergraduate contribution. Taking advantage of the new technologies for digitization and new media for the presentation and analysis of historical sources, The History Harvest serves as a prototype for a model of undergraduate e-learning in the humanities: one that is experiential, student-led, team-oriented, networked, community-based, "generative," and interdisciplinary.

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