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New Leviathan: How I Implemented the AAS's Periodicals Database in My Traditional American Literature Survey Class, and Lived to Tell the Tale

Abstract

This past summer, our small college's library purchased a permanent subscription to the American Antiquarian Society's new Historical Periodicals Collection (series 1-5). In northwest Iowa, where there is no such database for hundreds of miles, this purchase is a research boon for local scholars. The catch, though? I needed to implement the database thoroughly in the college's only early American literature class, a traditional survey spanning 1492 to 1865. Beyond all of the topics, authors, and agendas that could be covered—and the typical dilemma between coverage and depth in a survey class—now I needed to incorporate the teaching of periodical research, the history of periodicals in America, and the myriad ways that periodicals, authors, literature of various types, and reading publics intersected. All that in fifteen short weeks. My paper will illustrate specifically how I implemented the database into the survey class this fall, the first time I've used such a digital archive in any class. Our class combined a non-linear structure—we cycled through the period three times—with a battery of bibliography-and-analysis assignments that aided the students in teaching themselves about American periodicals. While covering traditional subjects (the Puritans, Ben Franklin, slavery), the course required students to investigate the discourses of periodicals on these subjects, and how these discourses were reaffirmed, altered, or attacked by literature that interacted with these periodicals (e.g., Defoe, Wheatley, Melville). I found that the course structure and the bibliography assignments were crucial in enhancing student learning of the period, which helped invigorate class discussion. I'll discuss the specific nature of my assignments and student outcomes, which were mostly positive, but also discuss what I would have to change the next time this course is offered.

Keywords

American Antiquarian Society's Historical Periodicals Collection, Dordt College, American literature, digital humanities

Disciplines

American Literature | Curriculum and Instruction

Comments

Paper presented at the American Literature Association's 25th Annual Conference on American Literature held in Washington, DC, May 22-25, 2014.

[Note to readers: This paper is a rough copy of a talk I gave at the 2014 American Literature Association conference, on a panel for teaching early American literature by using digital humanities resources. This paper is not polished—I used it as a sketch and often spoke off-the-cuff.]

The New Leviathan: How I Implemented the AAS's Periodicals Database in My Traditional American Literature Survey Class, and Lived to Tell the Tale

What I will discuss in this paper deals with a very good problem. That problem involves the ability to access massive, relatively new primary research databases. Obviously, this problem is very different from its opposite: no access to any research databases. However, in truth, there are a number of small and free periodical databases available for any classroom to use. What I will discuss in this paper—the implementation of a course structure and set of assignments that integrates periodical research into an early American literature classroom—is therefore applicable to anyone teaching American literature.

So here was my very good problem. In June 2013, the library at my college, Dordt College, made a major purchase. The library bought a permanent subscription to the American Antiquarian Society's new periodical database of early American periodicals (series 1-5). At that time, the AAS partnered with EBSCOhost to offer a temporary discount on the database. The head librarian at Dordt, Sheryl Taylor, astutely noted the long-term savings in such a deal—instead of a costly yearly subscription (\$5-\$6k), the one-time subscription fee amounted to only a few years' worth of yearly subscriptions. Sheryl swooped in and made the purchase.

And of course I was thrilled. I had worked fairly extensively with ProQuest's American Periodicals Series Online in graduate school. One of my professors, Kathleen Diffley, has helped spearhead the integration of periodical study into the field of 19C American literature, especially Civil War studies. Kathleen has also developed a sense and style for teaching periodical research in the American literature classroom. Having been in her classroom and working with her, I was used to periodical database inquiry. That's why, when I first came to Dordt in the fall of 2012, I asked Dordt's head librarian about the possibility of subscribing to a good periodicals database—any database at all. I told her then about the wealth of exciting possibilities for periodicals research, including the involvement of undergraduates in cutting-edge primary-source research.

Sheryl's answer then—in the fall of 2012—was that subscriptions to major periodicals database (EEBO, Proquest APSO) were far too expensive for a small college like ours. I understood. As a researcher, the lack of a good database would be a problem I'd have to deal with, since we live in NW Iowa, hundreds of miles from a university that subscribes to ProQuest.

So when Sheryl enthusiastically jumped on the AAS's discounted offer, several months after my initial inquiry, I was thrilled. And worried. Worried, because I would have to teach the periodical database to my undergraduate class. There wouldn't be a choice. The library invested in American literature, and now I had to deliver.

I initially worried about whether the integration of periodical research would be pedagogically sound. You see, I teach one early American literature class at Dordt. This in fact is Dordt's only early American literature class. It's a

survey course of sorts, which spans the period between early European colonization of the Americas and the Civil War. Unless Dordt students take a colonial American history course that the History department offers, my literature class is their only contact with American literature and culture through the 1860s. Thus my American lit. survey course, without even considering periodicals, already contains the age-old problem of coverage vs. depth. How much of the ever-expanding early American canon should I incorporate into this course? Which peoples, regions, topics, and literary modes do I focus on in fifteen weeks? Which do I largely ignore, because of time constraints? How much of this class should deal with local, regional, national, transatlantic, and global problems in early and 19C American texts? These were theoretical questions in grad school. Now, in the summer of 2013, they were real.

You've probably dealt with these vexing questions yourself in such a course. But now try to integrate research into early American magazines and weekly newspapers into it. Try to teach undergraduates how to research and help them discover the meanings of the research, along designing a good course on the vast expanse of early American literature, a course that honors the cultural depth and complexity of the times and places involved. A course with the poems, novels, and major essays of early America is one thing. A course with those plus newspapers, magazines, and a wealth of other texts is another.

The database added another strange problem to course design. Though it contains periodicals from as early as 1690, the bulk of them obviously are from the 1830s to 1877 (which is the database's endpoint). Essentially, this database is ideal for any class that focuses exclusively on the mid-19C. In a survey class, how exactly do I integrate it with colonial American studies, which I thoroughly

enjoy and want to show these students? If I proceeded to teach the class chronologically, beginning in September with 1492 and ending in December with 1865, then our use of the database would appear in the second half of the course, maybe even later. Given the fact that my students were all first-time users and researchers, I couldn't afford to delay their first contact with the database. I wanted students to appreciate the database for what it is, to find remarkable discoveries, to explore early American culture in the periodicals, to see the intricate connections between texts and contexts. All this would take time; with new students, it would have to take most of the semester. So the database would have to appear fairly early in the semester, and often.

I concocted a plan. Keep in mind that this plan was a pedagogical best guess; again, I remind you that I hadn't taught this class before, and now had to add in research I'd only done at the graduate level. I decided to cycle through the period from 1492 to 1865 three times in the semester. There would be three sections—a religion in America section first (Dordt is a Calvinist Christian college), a section on the construction of personal identities next, and last a section on contact with Indians, European colonization, and Western expansion. Each section would take roughly a third of the semester. We would proceed through the first section, marching from Puritanism to Transcendentalism, and near the end of that I would introduce periodical research. Thus students had glimpsed the entire period under discussion (1492-1865) and would encounter the database with 11 weeks left in the semester.

As I look back at the course, these three cycles through the period were crucial. Subjected to a number of courses that proceeded chronologically as an undergrad, I myself remember the attendant difficulties with that kind of course

construction. The main difficulty for me as a student was that, by the last weeks of the semester, I forgot most of what we discussed in the first weeks. I didn't want my students to forget colonial America, though. They needed to see and think through the discursive continuities and discontinuities between early European colonization and the early republic. Further, I knew that the periodical database would have scores of magazine essays and articles that discuss the colonial period from 19C points of view. The colonial period would always be present in a way in a way (hello *The Scarlet Letter!*); students had to be aware of that.

How about assignments? For their final assignment, I knew that I wanted them to write a sharp essay worthy of graduate school—after all, with the database handy, a relatively new and fascinatingly rich resource, I knew that they could at least attempt this. In this essay, they had to show how a certain text reacted to, responded to, agreed with, satirized, and at least discussed the periodical discourses of the day. That text ended up being *Moby-Dick*, the final work we discussed that semester.

So how to prepare them to write this essay? I asked them to do the same preparatory assignment four times. I called this assignment simply the “periodicals assignment.” The assignment asked them to find several articles in the database on a certain topic and to annotate those sources. They then had to profile one periodical they encountered, discussing its circulation, audiences, editorial agendas, and common cultural issues discussed/found in the periodical. Lastly, they had to write a two-page critical analysis on their findings. The analysis had to answer these questions: How do the periodicals generally talk

about the topic, what shocked or surprised you in what you found, and how does your research connect with one of the texts that we read in class.

Students performed the periodicals assignment four times for a couple of reasons. One was to get them as familiar as possible with the database. Since they knew nothing about primary-source research, let alone literary historicism and cultural theory, I assumed they would fumble and stumble through the periodicals assignment the first couple of times before sufficiently understanding some basics about the history of magazines in America. Also, the more they did the assignment, the more they would see rhetorical patterns and common ideologies of the period. When grading the first couple of periodicals assignments, I could name for them what they were seeing. Some would find a story that mixed temperance messages with republican ideals. When they first annotated it, they wouldn't notice it, but I would and could name "temperance" and "republicanism" for them (also "abolitionism," "imperialism"). If I did that on the first couple of assignments, I hoped, they would begin use these terms this later in the semester.

I should mention a couple of things about the periodicals assignment. For the periodical profile, I had them look specifically at Frank Luther Mott's *A History of American Magazines*. In several instances, Mott helped enormously. And for the critical analyses that they wrote, I asked them to discuss specific topics and refer to specific texts. This was crucial. In essence, the four periodical assignments were centered around four topics that we were sure to discuss in class. These topics were the Puritans in 19C periodicals, Ben Franklin in 19C periodicals, Columbus in 19C periodicals, and *Robinson Crusoe* and slavery in 19C periodicals. I chose each of these topics because they were a part of our

class and because of the amount of hits they generated. For instance, I knew that if students entered “Benjamin Franklin” into the database, they’d receive several hundred hits in a wide range of periodicals, from *Prairie Farmer* to *Putnam’s Monthly*. Directing student searches is another crucial strategy for teachers. If students are allowed to search for whatever they want, they are likely to generate nothing. Searches can be empty, frustrating first-time students who don’t know what to do after coming up empty. It was only late in the semester when students were allowed to search for whatever they wanted.

So the semester began. The class had 17 students, eight English education majors, five English majors, and four non-majors. We read through the Puritans, Emerson, and Hawthorne before arriving at the one class period I budgeted for discussing periodicals and print culture. Hawthorne seemed a reasonable figure to discuss, someone who used the boom in printing in the 1830s to earn a living as an author. This class period was easily the most boring of the semester for everyone. I intended it as a hands-on experience, but I ended up talking most of the time about the history of printing in the Americas and the importance of periodicals to the careers of a number of figures, including Poe and Hawthorne. I don’t even think that this class period was necessary. Students intuitively understood the database—it appears to be another search engine to them—and they can easily find “cool” stuff, especially if they search for images.

The first periodicals assignment, on the Puritans in 19C periodicals, was a predictable disaster. Beyond basic assignment format problems, students had trouble simply understanding the articles and effectively summarizing/annotating them. 19C rhetoric in particular is not easy to

comprehend. However, what they did not have a problem with was using the database and finding good material—these basic problems I think have to be avoided.

The next periodicals assignment two weeks later—on the way that 19C periodicals talked about Ben Franklin—was exponentially better. Because we had read Franklin’s *Autobiography*, students started to notice and pick apart agendas. Articles from a range of periodicals select elements from Franklin’s life for political, theological, and moralistic purposes. This became clear to the students when they began telling me that a periodical would point out something in Franklin’s *Autobiography* while ignoring other parts of it. Or misreading sections of the *Autobiography* altogether. So here, in this second round of the periodicals assignments, students began to notice and write about the sociopolitical and ideological agendas of each article and publication. Also, by this assignment, students began to notice the major periodicals of the time. Periodical profiles were written on *The Southern Literary Messenger* and the *Liberator*. However, they also found some really interesting discoveries. They profiled obscure but fascinating magazines—e.g., the *New York State Mechanic* and the *Green Mountain Gem* (based in Bradford, Vermont). Here’s the great thing about these assignments—the students were teaching me.

By this point, we had reached the last third of the semester and were just starting the colonialism and western expansion section of the class. Because of the second periodicals assignment demonstrated that the students were catching on, I wanted to challenge them a bit. I changed the third periodicals assignment from Columbus in 19C periodicals—a good idea—to Columbus and/or Cortes in 19C periodicals during the Mexican-American war. In other words, students

search queries were opened to Hernando Cortes, but limited to 1846 to 1848. Again, I checked the database to make sure that students would get enough meaningful hits.

Now I love this assignment in particular for a lot of reasons. It's about war and historical memory, how the past is shaped and re-shaped for present and future purposes. To me, it's easy to see the analogy: just as Cortes invaded and conquered Mexico, so the U.S. (in the 1840s) invaded Mexico. Thus, potentially, when any magazine commentator in the 1840s wrote about Cortes, he or she could be read as making an oblique political statement about the Mexican-American war. It's this kind of reading that my students, as good as they were, found hard to grasp. This assignment was split—a few got the potent historical analogy and the sociopolitical readings involved, but some did not. For those who didn't quite understand, this was my fault. Up to this point, I let the students roam the database and make discoveries and connections for themselves. We talked occasionally, but briefly, about periodical research throughout the semester. Yet here, I think I should've had a unit on the Mexican-American war, explaining the sides and what was at stake for them. I don't know how to do this in the course though—I'd rather deal with Columbus, Bartolome de las Casas, and Bernal diaz del Castillo at greater length.

For the final periodicals assignment, I changed it altogether. Instead of slavery in 19C periodicals, by far the most massive of the topics we touched on, I decided to use this periodicals assignment to help the students prepare for their long *Moby-Dick* essay. Here students were allowed to pick a topic in *Moby-Dick* that interested them—they had read 30-40% of the novel by then—and

find periodical material on that topic. Again, I limited the date range for search queries—the mid-1830s to the late-1850s.

This altered assignment turned out to work extremely well, because it prepared students to write a good final paper with lots of evidence, a paper well-informed by historical contexts and cultural discourses. Student topics here were perhaps predictable, but still fascinating. They researched depictions of cannibals in 19C periodicals, predestination, coffins and burial rituals, tattoos, deadly sea monster encounters, insane asylums, and Zoroastrianism. The resulting *Moby-Dick* papers were some of the best literary undergraduate essays I've ever seen. Textual explication became cultural analysis. Melville became not just a writer of a so-called great book, but a magazine reader and cultural participant. *Moby-Dick* the novel became real, a product of its day in part, a participant in the history of the Americas. Moreover, the magazines and newspapers of America became part of literary and cultural history. One day in class, several students noticed that *Moby-Dick*, with its shifting topicality and multi-textuality, closely resembled the very magazines that they had been reading through all semester.

As you can tell, I think the class was a success. On course evaluations, without me prompting them at all, 8 of the 13 students who filled out the evaluation mentioned something about the periodicals assignments. The assignments were “very useful,” one said. “Helpful” said another. “fascinating,” “very interesting and I learned a lot,” two more said. The comment I really appreciated was this, the very goal I had for the integration of the database: “I've come to realize through this class how influential culture is in shaping my views and beliefs.” Surprisingly to me, only one comment was

somewhat negative: “I would ask for less reading and not so many periodical analyses.” At the beginning of the semester, that’s what I thought they’d all say, because I made them write far more than they normally would in an English class. I think they didn’t notice because, with the database, they were actually having a bit of fun.

What would I change? Next time I might have them actually read a specific issue of a magazine with the database, say an issue of the *Liberator*, at the same time that we read Frederick Douglass’ autobiography. Or a couple of articles in *Scientific American* when we look at Hawthorne’s “The Birth-Mark.” The possibilities are tantalizing, though I still find myself constrained by lack of time and the issue of coverage vs. depth. *Moby-Dick* took a large chunk of the semester, obviously. I might ditch it. Then again, a major text surrounded by periodical research worked all too well, better than I expected. One student from the class got into an English graduate program using a his *Moby-Dick* paper as his sample essay in his application. I can’t say that that paper was a difference-maker, but I’m sure that it helped him look professional: his paper at least resembled the kinds of work we see at this conference and in contemporary journals.

Conclusion: It is hard to imagine teaching the course again *without* the AAS database.

Original Proposal

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