Beyond English Departments: Digital Humanities in Upper-Level Modern Language Courses

Hélène Bilis & Laura O’Brien

Wellesley College
“Six Degrees of Marie-Antoinette: Social Networks on the French Revolution”

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 cafés, provincial Academies, 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 Régime fictional, historical, and political networks as a means of understanding the origins of the French Revolution. 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.
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Challenges

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

- Upper level French course: expectations for reading, discussion, analysis, assignments
- Student goal is above all to perfect their French
Challenges

ASSIGNMENTS

- Varying student familiarity with and interest in working with data
- Workflow: getting enough of a hold on the material to ask interesting questions
Challenges

TIME CONSTRAINTS

- “Course and a half” syndrome (Kaleta, Skibba, & Joosten, 2007)
- Splitting time between the historical context, the primary texts, the tools, and the critique of the method
Challenges

- Mastering Gephi but not making this a “Gephi course”
- Finding good data sets
- Time spent on the tool not on “humanities learning”
Solutions: A Partnership: Class/Lab Model

**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 (*ateliers*).
Solution: The «Journal de Bord» (The Journey Book)

Mellon Evidence-Based Teaching Innovation grant: “Using Digital Humanities Approaches to Improve Student Metacognition in an Advanced French Course”

- **Weekly Writing with two main goals:**
  1. To enable French writing on a regular basis and allow students to practice their French expression, grammar, and vocabulary, especially by integrating the new terms they are learning
  2. To give students a chance to share their impressions, reflections, and questions regarding the DH activities and readings

- **Brief format - 1 to 1.5 page double spaced**
The Journal de Bord: The Journey Book

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## Data Visualization Rubric

> Single-point rubric adapted from Polley et al (2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mastery</th>
<th>Proficiency</th>
<th>Needs Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mastery</strong></td>
<td><strong>Proficiency</strong></td>
<td><strong>Needs Work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic (20 / 20)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Visualizations have a clearly defined topic that address a specific,</td>
<td>The visualization has a defined topic that addresses a specific question.</td>
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<tr>
<td>sophisticated question. Graphs and tables work in concert to</td>
<td>The visualization facilitates making an argument.</td>
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<tr>
<td>facilitate making an argument, and all necessary visualizations have</td>
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<td>been provided.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Data (19 / 20)</strong></td>
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<td>Clear choices made, defended in analysis.</td>
<td>The sources, structure, and rhetorical choices made in selecting and</td>
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<td>constructing the data used for the visualization are clear.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Visuals (19 / 20)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unexpected but effective use of color to highlight symmetric vs.</td>
<td>Applies appropriate graphic variable types (e.g., size, color) for the data.</td>
<td>Given that you are filtering based on volume of communication, weighted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asymmetric relationships between Voltaire and his correspondents.</td>
<td>Colors are sufficiently distinct and convey information; size of nodes</td>
<td>degree (instead of degree) might be a better choice for sizing nodes,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>convey information.</td>
<td>since color is already being used to indicate degree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visualizations are very clear, uncluttered, and generally easy to read.</td>
<td>Applies appropriate layout for the data type and scale for optimal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tables are equally clear, attractive, and well laid-out, highlighting</td>
<td>readability. The graph is uncluttered; distinct features of the data such</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>relevant information. Analysis cogently explains strengths and</td>
<td>as</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Projects

➔ Weeks 1-4: Study of a contemporary network

➔ Weeks 5-8: Study of a historical network (2 parts)

➔ Weeks 9-13: Study of a fictional network (2 parts)

➔ Final project of their choice

Strategies

➔ Balance primary texts / historical context with DH texts / approaches

➔ Introduce network concepts and visualization tools early

➔ Transparent teaching design (Winklemes 2013)
  ◆ Outline purpose, tasks, and success criteria for each assignment
  ◆ Engage students in applying the grading criteria to promote understanding
  ◆ Debrief graded assignments in class
Study of a contemporary network

➔ Investigate a Twitter network

➔ Objectives:
   ♦ Learn basic concepts of network analysis
   ♦ Become familiar with Gephi software

Fig. 1 Réseau entier de VilledéBondy, groupé par couleur selon la modularité, taille de nœud déterminé par degré, format de Force Atlas 2
Study of a historical network

→ **Part I: Critique of a DH project**

→ **Objectives:**
  ♦ Identify sources and methods used to create humanistic data for an existing DH project ([Mapping the Republic of Letters](https://example.com))
  ♦ Analyze the DH project’s data schema and visualizations
Study of a historical network

Part II: Investigate a historical network research question

Objectives:

- Manipulate a large existing dataset for a research purpose
- Produce readable and informative data visualizations by making thoughtful choices about layout and graphic variable types (e.g. size, color)
- Make an argument based on an interpretation of a data visualization

A bipartite graph of Voltaire’s correspondents and their intellectual pursuits. Size of node is the number of letters individual exchanged with Voltaire.
Study of a historical network

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Study of a fictional network

- **Part I:** correspondence network of an epistolary novel
- **Part II:** network represented within the letters of a single character
- **Objectives:**
  - Apply understanding of key concepts of social networks to a fictional text.
  - Identify and articulate the particular concerns of fictional networks in order to sharpen understanding of good data collection practices.
A social network within a novel

- Capturing interactions between characters through close reading
- **Google form** to track each interaction between characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Source Character</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Target Character</th>
<th>Numéro de lettre</th>
<th>Lettre Recipient</th>
<th>Passage</th>
<th>Type de relation</th>
<th>mensongère?</th>
<th>Sujet</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 Cécile de Volanges</td>
<td>7 Le Chevalier Danceny</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>La Marquise de Merteuil</td>
<td>Vous saurez don</td>
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<td>7 Le Chevalier Danceny</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>La Marquise de Merteuil</td>
<td>[Vilmont] a été e</td>
<td>Conversation ouverte</td>
<td>inconnu</td>
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<td>Vous voudrez e</td>
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<td>La Marquise de Merteuil</td>
<td>... j'ai remis à</td>
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<td>null</td>
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<td>Il n'y a que l'idée</td>
<td>Mention (de l'interlocuteur)</td>
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<td>... aussi c'est que</td>
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<td>null</td>
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<td>Comme il faut é t</td>
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<td>1 Cécile de Volanges</td>
<td>10 Le Comte de Gercourt</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>Le Chevalier Danceny</td>
<td>M. de Gercourt, c</td>
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<td>null</td>
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"M. le Chevalier de Danceny, ce Monsieur dont je t’ai parlé, et avec qui j’ai chanté chez Mme de Merteuil...."

("M. Chevalier de Danceny, that fellow I told you about, and with whom I sang at Mme de Merteuil’s home.")

"Il n’y a que Madame de Merteuil avec qui je parle librement, quand je parle de mon amour."

("There is only Madame de Merteuil with whom I speak freely, when I speak of my love.")
Study of a fictional network

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Graphe 1 – Réseau entier
Les noeuds mesure pesée de centralité ; Les couleurs reflètent les sous communautés (détterminées par logiciel de modularité)
Benefits and Challenges

Benefits

➔ Sustained engagement with Laclos’s novel
➔ Deep understanding of letter-writing, epistolary genre, historical vs. fictional correspondences
➔ Practice of and emphasis on back-and-forth between close and distant reading (in French)
➔ Perfecting writing using DATA

Areas to Improve

➔ Project pace: build in (more) room to breathe!
➔ Gephi Struggles: Explore other graphing tools for visualization
➔ Enough French language? Enough French reading?
➔ More group work?
➔ More DH or French Scholarship?
DH in the Modern Language Classroom - Takeaways

❖ Using French in ways not typical of French literature classroom
  ➢ moving language study out of narrow realm = a plurilingual DH

❖ Students sharing their work in new ways
  ➢ Group “lab” office hours
  ➢ collaborative experience in atelier class sessions

❖ Challenge the divides between knowledge production in the sciences and the humanities:
  understanding data humanistically

❖ Recognizing essential constructions of disciplinary knowledge
  ...but also the ways in which these can give rise to false impressions of the varying prerogatives of knowledge production across campus
Images

de Boufflers, Stanislas-Jean. *Mr. de Voltaire.* 1765. Artstor,
library-artstor-org.ezproxy.wellesley.edu/asset/ANGAIG_10313957923

https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8614559d

Grandjean, Martin. *Graphe représentant les métadonnées de milliers de documents d'archives, documentant le réseau social de centaines d'acteurs de la Société des Nations.* 2 Nov. 2013. Wikimedia Commons,
commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Social_Network_Analysis_Visualization.png. CC-BY-SA 3.0

Labille-Guiard, Adélaïde. *Portrait d'une femme.* c. 1787. Wikimedia Commons,
commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portrait_of_a_woman_by_Ad%C3%A9la%C3%AFde_Labille-Guiard_-_1787.jpg
