Making Digital History: students as partners in online learning, teaching and research

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Also available at:	http://makingdigitalhistory.co.uk/
Further information:	HEA Digital Literacies in the Disciplines: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/learningandtech/ELT-DLinD-SP Making Digital History news: http://makingdigitalhistory.co.uk/news/ Twitter link: https://twitter.com/MakDigHist Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/makingdigitalhistory For background, see: J Wood (2011): Helping students to become disciplinary researchers using questioning, social bookmarking and inquiry-based learning, *Practice and Evidence of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 6.1, 3-26 [online at https://www.academia.edu/689002/Helping_Students_to_Become_Disciplinary_Researchers_Using_Questioning_Social_Bookmarking_and_Inquiry-Based_Learning] J. Wood and M. Ryan (2010): Constructing disciplinary inquiry communities through Web 2.0, in R. Donnelly, J. Harvey & K. C. O'Rourke, eds., *Critical Design and Effective Tools for E-Learning in Higher Education* (Hershey: IGI Global), 195-211 [online at https://www.academia.edu/556053/Constructing_disciplinary_inquiry_communities_through_Web_2.0]

Background

- TECHNOLOGY CONTEXT. Xerte (http://www.xerte.org.uk/index.php?lang=en) is a learning design tool that was developed at the University of Nottingham with JISC funding. In the past it has generally been used by staff and educational developers/ technologists to present information to students. The Making Digital History project, supported by the Higher Education Academy as part of the Digital Literacies in the Disciplines funding stream, seeks to use a 'students as partners' approach to develop e-learning resources using the Xerte Online Toolkit in conjunction with students.
- INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT. Our approach aligns very well with the University of

Lincoln's core pedagogy of 'Student as Producer' (http://studentasproducer.lincoln.ac.uk/), also developed and embedded in the institution through HEA funding. This pedagogic approach focuses on the role of students as collaborators in the production of knowledge, meaning that there is a high level of expertise in developing and supporting projects that engage students in independent and research-based online learning (both individually and collaboratively). For example, the Centre for Educational Research and Development has conducted a number of HEA- and JISC-funded e-learning and open educational resource (OER) projects (for example, the JISC-funded OER project Chemistry.FM: https://chemistryfm.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk/about/ and http://forensicchemistry.lincoln.ac.uk/).

- DEPARTMENTAL CONTEXT. At the same time as the Making Digital History project was being designed, the History degree at Lincoln was being revalidated. This involved a process of aligning the History curriculum more fully with the Student as Producer model, creating space for more student-centred and research-based learning in the curriculum. Five members of academic staff thus collaborated in developing the Making Digital History project with the aim of testing and, if successful, embedding Xerte in the curriculum across levels and (see the next section for specific details). We planned to appoint several paid 'Student Ambassadors' to support the project by helping to run workshops, to holding consultation hours in which they could deal with technical difficulties, and to help to disseminate the project (esp. online using social media).

Description of pedagogical approach

- The key innovation underpinning the Making Digital History project is that students are required to produce their own Xerte objects rather than 'consume' Xerte-based content that we, as teachers, produce for them. We have created a number of sample Xerte objects for them to look at (http://makingdigitalhistory.co.uk/resources/learning-design/xerte-guidance-and-faq/xerte-gallery/primary-source-examplar-einhards-life-of-charlemagne/) and provide a lot of online and face-to-face support (http://makingdigitalhistory.co.uk/resources/learning-design/xerte-guidance-and-faq/), but the ethos underpinning the project was for the students to produce online resources themselves.
- Overall, we introduced Xerte-based activities as assessed elements of five modules in the History department at Lincoln. These modules are of varying level, size, type, focus, chronological period; and the students are asked to use Xerte in different ways in each module (collaborative/ individual; compulsory/ elective); while the value of the work in relation to module assessment also varies.
- The modules which we have evaluated most fully so far is East meets West (Jamie Wood and Antonella Luizzo Scorpo), a first year core module in semester A with over 100 students. Xerte was used as part of a source analysis assignment in which groups of students (3-5) were required to create a Xerte object with between 8 and 10

'pages' that offered an audience of their peers (students at other universities who will eventually be able to access the content online): (a) a brief introduction to a specific primary source from the medieval Mediterranean; (b) an concise explanation of some short extracts from that text; (c) links to further resources which are already available online (e.g. articles on the BBC website; podcasts by academics); (d) a short annotated bibliography; (e) at least two interactive elements.

- Other modules which used Xerte included:
  - Representing the Past (Erin Bell; first year; semester A) in which 10 students (from a cohort of over 90) chose to use Xerte to present their individual independent research into the different ways in which history is and has been presented to the public.
  - Urban Life and Society in the Middle Ages (Antonella Liuzzo Scorpo; second year; semester A; 20 students) in which small groups (2-3) of students created Xerte objects that explored specific aspects of medieval urban societies using a case study approach.
  - In Research skills in Medieval Studies (Joanna Huntington; MA; semester A; 10 students), students were required individually to create a Xerte object that incorporated their reflection on a research project that they had done in the past and provided advice (and links to online resources) to help undergraduate students avoid 'making the same mistakes as I did'. This replaced a reflective piece of writing in the assessment portfolio.
- In Gender in 19th century Britain (Kate Hill; second year; semester B; 40 students) students will be given the option of producing a Xerte object rather than writing a standard primary source report.
- Our aim is eventually (and with ethical approval and the students' permission) to publish examples of student-produced resources online.

Reflections and lessons learnt

- As noted above, the module which we have evaluated most fully, and which saw the most extensive use made of the Xerte tool, is the East meets West first year module. The following reflections thus draw mostly on our experience of putting this module together.
- In terms of usability, once it has been installed on an institutionally-supported server, the basics of the Xerte tool can be grasped by staff and students within a 45-60 minute training session in a computer lab (http://makingdigitalhistory.co.uk/resources/learning-design/xerte-guidance-and-faq/xerte-gallery/postcard-from-lincoln/).
- Although we have not yet collated all of the evaluative data gathered, students (often after some initial trepidation) reacted positively to the technology. They felt that it had enabled them to build up their collaborative working skills, their ability to use technology, as well as developing their knowledge of the subject and their ability to present information effectively in a digital format.
- Our observations and assessments of student work confirmed the students' appraisal of the Xerte tool and the pedagogic approach we had developed to using it.

The quality of student work was high in general and there was engagement with both the academic content (the analysis of the primary source itself) and technological form of the assessment (making an effective Xerte object). Those who scored highest on the assessment married effective use of the technology with careful consideration of the source(s) and its context of production. None of the groups on the East meets West module failed the assessment and all achieved a score over 50%, with most scoring in the 2.1 category. There were some outstanding pieces of work, which are no doubt of publishable quality.

- Completing the first iteration of the module and subsequently marking student assignments has confirmed the utility of this approach, although we plan to develop it further in 2014-15. Modifications include:
  - providing the students with at least one seminar in which they can present their plans for the Xerte object and receive feedback;
  - introducing a small mid-point assessment (10% of module grade) in which students will have to submit a plan of their Xerte object (this will also enable us to identify students who have not been in contact with their group);
  - publicising the support that is available online and elsewhere more widely and providing more direction about common mistakes to avoid (which we now know about having marked the first set of assignments);
  - increasing the assessment weighting for the group Xerte project from 30% to 50% (including the 10% mid-point assessment just mentioned) to reflect the amount and quality of student work;
  - developing a peer-assessment element in order to encourage engagement with the group work process.

- The use of student ambassadors can be an effective method of supporting student work and of disseminating the project, but there are inevitable compromises to be made with their academic and other work commitments. Allowance needs to be made for training the student ambassadors and, if necessary, for recruiting new ones.

- Support from institutional educational developers/technologists is essential if tools such as Xerte are to be made available (e.g. Xerte has to be installed on an institutional server) and shared more widely across the institution. We have been very fortunate in this regard at Lincoln and have recently secured further funding to share our learning across the institution.