

# Digital archives built by students for students

## Inherited learning at University of Hertfordshire

### Summary

Inherited learning is the latest stage of a programme to develop digital history methods in the undergraduate curriculum at the University of Hertfordshire's history department. Involving more members of staff than before and a range of topics, it engages students in discovering visual and textual material from online archives in response to specific remits. Learners construct the results into new archival collections that are published on the open web and used as a resource on which subsequent student cohorts can build. Harnessing students' propensity to use digital technology in their studies, as well as generally in their lives, it puts this to use in the service of techniques integral to the evolution of the discipline and the construction of genuine historical knowledge.

The initiative helps students:

- Develop historical understanding
- Learn how to write for a public audience
- Understand the scope of archival collections and issues around them
- Create a tangible public output

Initial results are positive with strong student engagement and plans to involve an increasing number of staff in future years.

### The challenge

The University of Hertfordshire's business-facing ethos pervades all aspects of its teaching, learning and research, including in areas such

as the humanities where links with business are less direct. This means ensuring that students are abreast of new opportunities and solutions to both traditional questions and new problems, while maintaining and improving the quality of learning, teaching and research in a university that received a gold award in the TEF.

The history department at Hertfordshire focuses on understanding the how and why of the past, as well as recounting what happened, and on the relevance of historical understanding to contemporary life. Hence for the past few years it has included training in digital history among its undergraduate offering, rather than just for postgraduates to whom it is more often confined. Harnessing the familiarity of students with digital technology, and recognising that students will put digital tools to strategic use anyway in their studies, the aims are:

- To involve students in activities that demonstrate how this technology can be used to understand history
- To construct new historical knowledge
- To lead into some of the cutting-edge techniques within the discipline
- To provide ways of working with wider applicability

The inherited learning initiative, rolled out for the first time in 2017/18 to final year undergraduates, is a new offering involving a number of teaching staff across the

department. It engages students in the issues of working with and creating archival collections of both textual and visual material. Students are creating new collections that can be of lasting value, providing new historical insights and learning both technical and communication skills, as well as engaging in valid historical research. Students have traditionally been users of digital archives: this approach teaches them to be *creators*.

### The learning activity

Final year undergraduate students work with academic staff – four in the first year, expanding to five in 2018/19 – to search for online content in response to a remit provided by staff. They then curate the content they find into new collections that are published online and credited to the student (if they agree). These collections, properly organised and tagged, are available to be used by future generations of students and researchers both at Hertfordshire and elsewhere. Hence the project title of 'Inherited Learning', which embraces both the looking backwards and the

paying forward aspects of the activity, with the idea that future cohorts of students can build on the already published collections to create increasingly rich archives of material over time.

The activities cover four module areas:

- Migrants and minorities
- The Pacific Rim
- Princes and paupers
- Bodies and sexuality

A typical challenge to students might be, for example, to find historical cartoons on the topic of migration, or images around themes to do with bodies and sexuality in the early modern period. Once found, the results are organised into navigable collections and sub-collections, with metadata about each item written and tagged, and subsequently published on the open web.

When students work with datasets compiled by previous students they are working with sets of records that no one else in the world has access to in that form. This has already happened in the princes and paupers module where a previous cohort had compiled a new dataset which students in the current initiative could access, while in the bodies and sexuality module they had a dataset compiled by the tutor. In future iterations all students will have access to these unique datasets. That means they can do real original research and ask genuine research questions to which the answers are as yet unknown. This is an unusual experience at undergraduate level.

### Student experience

The digitally-focused activities are a mix of mandatory and optional for students undertaking the modules. They have been enthusiastically received by those who participated. Through social media platforms many students are well used to sharing aspects of their lives with the



# Inherited Learning

Digital Archives. Built by Students. For Students

Leaving learning resources richer than when we found them.

What if today's students created resources not just for their own use, but for future cohorts? What if each successive wave of students did the same, always leaving the collection and module richer than when they arrived? This 'Inherited Learning' harnesses the enthusiasm of students, the power of the social web, and the expertise of our history staff to launch an exciting new teaching and learning opportunity, and support teaching in four final year history modules at the University of Hertfordshire



Migrants & Minorities



The Pacific Rim



Princes & Paupers



Bodies & Sexuality

world, and they often embrace the idea of contributing to something bigger than just their own academic success. However, the activity extends beyond social media and the web: students might, for example, develop spreadsheet skills through activities that involve working with data rather than images. All students undertaking the modules need to learn about how to understand, construct and code metadata and metadata standards (Dublin Core) to enable future discovery, and about issues of provenance and online referencing. They also learn about the benefits and drawbacks of various content management systems, such as Omeka, Historypin and Instagram.

Of course, these activities are not only about technical skills. For one thing, what is developed is historical knowledge and understanding: for example, seeing a broad cross-section of cartoons about immigration is a good way of grasping and illustrating past understandings of the issue. But in addition, by constructing new archives students have to think through the question of the audience for their work. Often the tendency in essays is to think of an audience of just one – the tutor – but now they have to think of a public audience and the various roles and interests of potential viewers and users of the archive they are making. They are thus learning to think in public, how to write for a public audience, and how to make their writing publicly available and accessible in a digital environment. These are all highly valuable transferable skills for future employment.

Students also learn to think about how archives are constructed and the issue of the completeness of archives. By contributing to archives themselves they start to see how haphazard they can be, leading them to question other repositories and so making them better, more reflective researchers. At the end of the activity students have a tangible output they can point to as part of

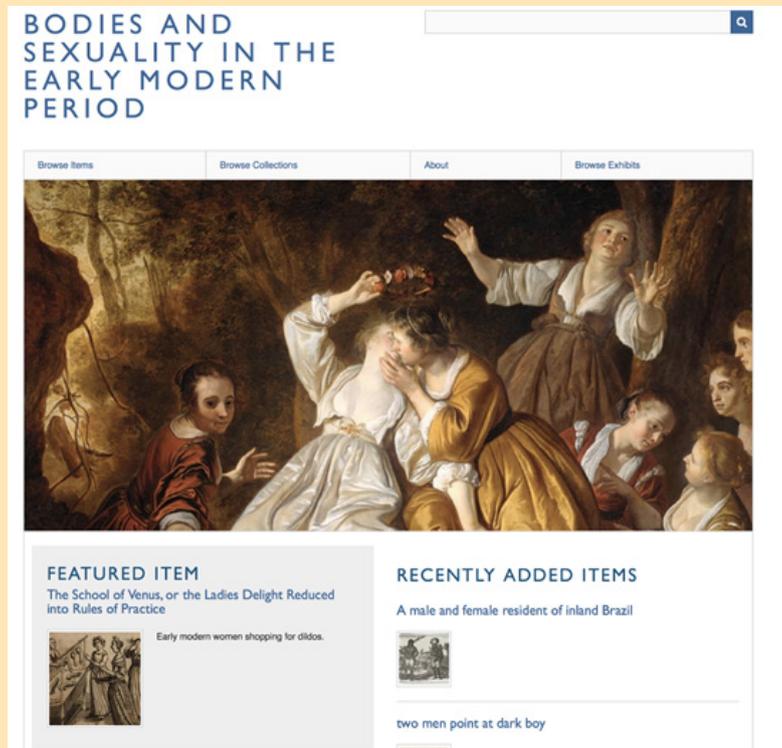
a portfolio when seeking to demonstrate what they have done during their studies. This is an unusual outcome from history programmes.

### **Staff experience and institutional support**

Earlier initiatives on the use of digital history in undergraduate teaching at Hertfordshire were led by one lecturer, Dr Adam Crymble. For this latest set of projects, Adam is working with other historians in the department - Drs Emma Battell Lowman, Katrina Navickas, and Jennifer Evans. Their common attribute is an interest in the use of digital archives in teaching and being themselves technically adept and comfortable working with archives. The project design is flexible enough to be adaptable to the needs of each module involved, so that it fits into the overall pedagogical structure of each, and to be at a level which each tutor feels comfortable with personally.

Initiatives such as these, using digital archives, also make it easier to bring research-informed teaching into the classroom, because students work with (and help create) archives of exactly the sources they need to study. A perfect digital archive rarely already exists for classes on a tutor's area of expertise, and this approach is a solution to that problem. Twenty-five years ago, tutors used to source books of printed primary sources. Now they can make their own digital versions, customised to their teaching need, and can further improve learning as students can be involved in the activity and helping to shape the outcome.

The first year of the project was enabled by a teaching and learning grant from the school of humanities at the university, which supported the employment of two recent graduates - Keavy Hunnigal Gaw and Sammy Sturgess - as teaching and learning assistants, helping staff launch the activities and overcoming initial issues. As the project enters its second year this pump-priming support ends.



The design of the project, however, means it is low-cost enough to be affordable, and staff can share their experience with new colleagues who now want to join in.

One unforeseen issue was that one of the activities – the finding of historical cartoons on the topic of migration already referred to – raised delicate issues of propriety, as it means publishing on the open web images whose content would be morally unacceptable today. This issue was considered by the university's equality office before being agreed, and also provided a valuable point for students to consider and discuss. The archive is published with a suitable disclaimer pointing out that, as historians, this past era of racial prejudice and caricature can be neither condoned nor concealed.

#### Lessons learned and wider impact

With one year of the initiative completed, only informal student feedback has been captured to date and this is positive. One student was

reluctant to be publicly credited on the web for their work and this request has been accommodated. Staff judge the work produced by students to be high quality and that the initiative provides a good way for students to learn about working with primary source material, as well as the more obvious historical knowledge and technical and communication skills developed.

The opportunity to employ recent graduates as teaching and learning assistants on the project also provided employability benefits to them. A quote from one (Sammy Sturgess) reflects this and gives an indication of the benefits to students:

***“As someone looking to pursue a career in history, I found working in the University of Hertfordshire history department part time on this collaborative project valuable experience and helpful in my transition out of university. It was a real vote of confidence from my lecturers to be given this opportunity to work with them. The inherited learning project helped me develop many useful skills to add to my ‘historian’s toolkit’ whilst looking for a longer-term job in an academic/ heritage organisation. For example, experience engaging with students in the classroom, working in depth with digital humanities resources and working collaboratively with academics in a busy history department. My experience working with Emma [Battell Lowman] gave me demonstrable examples during my interview for my current position at the History of Parliament Trust”***

Sammy Sturgess, graduate, University of Hertfordshire

Some issues encountered were not foreseen. Working with text has been more difficult than with visual archives, and not always for obvious reasons: for example, an assignment to gain insight into the royal lifestyle through looking at archives of British Royal Family menus from the Georgian period ran into a barrier as they were partly written in French, which was not easy for all students to understand.

From the staff viewpoint, in an area that is still regarded as experimental, the faculty involved need to be comfortable working in this way and enthusiastic about it. It has become even clearer that there is a need to tailor activities carefully to enable students to complete them successfully.

A benefit from the project is that it cuts down on the risk of plagiarism and buying essays. Students need to be intimate with the particular resources with which they are working in order to write their essays, and this is a unique experience. As a benefit of having students undertake detailed work in digital archives, this could have wider application.

With the project already expanding in the history department as it enters its second year, the plan looking ahead is to seek to work with academics in other departments in Hertfordshire who would be willing to try similar activities in their discipline – geography and linguistics are both considering the applicability to their own courses. In the university more broadly, it fits in to the approach of “digitising the curriculum” – adding in digital skills in a range of contexts rather than making “digital” the core of a particular module.

#### Find out more

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Jisc case study of previous digital history undergraduate teaching at Hertfordshire:

<https://digitisation.jiscinvolve.org/wp/2017/02/21/digital-in-the-undergraduate-history-curriculum-a-spotlight-on-the-digital-case-study>



Education consultancy Sero HE was commissioned by Jisc to interview Adam Crymble about developments **in learning and teaching in a digital age** at the University of Hertfordshire. The studies focus in particular on the impact of such developments on the student experience.