

Student-Focused Digital Projects in Short-Term Study Abroad Experiences

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Summary

This paper outlines a brief history of three interdisciplinary undergraduate digital humanities courses that featured study abroad trips to Rome, Italy and collaborative approaches to student-focused digital projects. Faculty presenters are housed in Digital Humanities, New Media, and Religious Studies, and co-developed courses and study abroad experiences that prioritize methods for researching, documenting, and visualizing placed-based discourse. In our latest iteration, our course showcases narrative geospatial humanities work, media production skills, and critical analytical methods for our students' analysis of place and religious history/culture. Our goal is to showcase the evolution of our interdisciplinary collaboration so that others might emulate it, critically reflect on our progress, and provide faculty with examples of DH work that is both student-focused and participatory.

Context & Background

Critical GIS work in the humanities, especially geospatial work in DH, is often mobilized to visualize and reflect on minoritarian perspectives and discourse. To name a few, the Torn Apart / Separados team visualized the effects of the US's 2018 "zero tolerance" policy for asylum seekers. DH scholar-practitioners at the University of Richmond have visualized events leading to slavery's end during the American Civil War via "Visualizing Emancipation." Further, mapping projects like "Artists in Paris" or "Gathering Places: Religion & Community in Milwaukee," take a historical view while thinking critically about their sense of place and subjects therein—maps like these visualize historical differences and comment on cultural change.

Our courses and each iteration of our project explore similar tensions, but we utilize methods that showcase students' first hand experience. In the past, we explored themes like 'locating absence,' asking students to consider what it means to map something that is no longer present, or, inversely, what it means to visualize something that has been co-opted and ideologically obscured. We focused specifically on issues of ethnic diversity in Italy alongside the rise of ethno-nationalist ideologies. A second

iteration asked students to map contemporary cultural spaces in contrast to historical ruins. In our most current iteration, we focus on religious history and culture.

Like many other disciplines, religious studies has experienced a "material turn" in the past decade, with fresh interest on the subject of place and material objects in the study of religion (see Plate, *Key Terms in Material Religion*; McDannell, *Material Christianity*). Our collaboration with religious studies faculty allows students to examine the material mediation of historical narratives, particularly theological concepts (broadly conceived to include Jewish, Christian, and pre-Christian Roman traditions) that are site-specific in Rome, Italy. Practically speaking, students work to visualize the complexities of religious narrative and archive their place-based experiences via digital maps, VR video, social media projects, and an Omeka repository. The collaboration also brings students to Ostia Antica, the ancient port of Rome, to compare and analyze the relationship of the built environment—both reconstructed and in ruin—to the historical narration of the Roman and Italian past. While the project focuses mostly on art and architecture, students also encounter and consider the mediation of relics in the Catholic tradition, analyzing sites such as the Capuchin Crypt's religious tradition of curating human bones. While Christianity dominates much of Roman art and architecture, students also examine the subculture of Jewish Rome, analyzing both the Great Synagogue of Rome, its adjacent Jewish museum, and the Jewish Quarter. This site allows for an important exercise in analysis of Roman identity outside of the dominant culture of Catholic Christianity.

Skills & Methods

Student-focused projects demonstrate competence in three areas: basic knowledge of HTML and GeoJSON deployed via the MapBox Studio, media production in the form of still images and vlogs, and archival processes that span popular social media platforms to a unified Omeka build out of the trip. As students engage with various forms of curated religious culture, they consider questions like: how is religion presented in museum and museum-like settings around Rome? How are religious sites presented as museums or museum-like sites? How are codes of behavior mediated and enforced to non-religious visitors of these sites? Further, students focus on three methodological areas of focus that serve as modules for our collaborative course. For ease, we refer to each method by its essential function in the project's evolution:

1. **Built Environment:** Student training and historical work begins months prior to our departure for Rome. Students are introduced to historical texts, maps, and virtual exhibits of the locations we eventually visit.
2. **Narrative:** Students are introduced to narrative concepts and theological concepts that correspond to mediating structures—architecture, statuary, art, texts—around Rome. We rely specifically on mobile storytelling practices that prioritize the "location, including its histories, cultural conflicts, communities, and architectures (to name only a few) and make these aspects foundational for the experience of the space" (Farman 3).
3. **Site-Specific Media Practice:** Our final area of focus is an outgrowth of combining site-specific media assignments in Rome with digital archival and mapping technologies. Prior to our departure, students learn best practices for organizing and archiving content on three platforms: Google Drive, cPanel, and Omeka. Students are also introduced to video pro-

duction and editing technologies, while more advanced students focus on the production of immersive 360° video.

On site, students collect data (geolocation, historical information, images, and video) that are later archived and visualized. The guiding questions above provide context in the media that students create and in the archival descriptions of each object. Finally, the map acts as an alternative visualization and interactive site that places student-made media in its geographical location. Upon our return, editing our media and aggregating our media objects into our Omeka archive allows students to critically reflect on their experiences as they also contextualize those experiences for the viewer/user.

Outcomes

As part of our presentation, we will make our syllabi, methods, and projects available to our audience and discuss the importance of digital documentation projects that prioritize student-focused collaboration. Our goal in this presentation is to outline our methodology and describe the pedagogical situation in which the project is deployed. We will not only provide examples of student-made media housed on our various maps, but demonstrate how they work to synthesize site-specific cultural heritage experiences with critical investigations of place and the materiality of religion in Rome as expressed via digital narrative projects. Our work underscores how religious studies, media production, and simple mapping techniques lead undergraduates to view the importance of material mediation in the construction of narrative, especially regarding history and theology.

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