Assignment: Exploring Literary Materials through Digital Collections

Image: Alexandra Bolintineanu

Overview

In this assignment, you build a digital exhibit to explore a literary object or theme in the text you are studying. In other words, you create a website with a digital collection and exhibit, using the free, open-source content management platform Omeka.

- The digital collection gathers and catalogues evidence about a literary theme: quotations, sound files, manuscript pages, images. Each item of your digital collection will be described systematically, like books are described in a library catalogue.
- The exhibit is a digital essay; it weaves your evidence into a coherent narrative or argument.

This is a scaffolded assignment: that is, you will produce several components at each stage, and each component builds on the ones before it-- like LEGO, except you get to build your own bricks.

Note for Instructors: Please note that this is a general-purpose Omeka assignment framework for a literary studies classroom. If you use this assignment in your course, you may wish to significantly adapt it.

Learning Goals

By the end of this learning module, you will have learned:

- How scholarly narratives can be assembled through digital collections
- What Omeka is, and what content management systems are
- What metadata is, and why metadata matters (with special reference to the Dublin Core metadata standard)
- How to create your own Omeka site: building items, batch-uploading items, creating digital collections and building exhibits featuring scholarly materials

This assignment will strengthen your writing, your information literacy, and your visual literacy. If you like, you can even write a bit of code.

Components:

1. A spreadsheet with the items in your collection
2. A digital collection
3. A digital exhibit website
4. The narrative for your digital exhibit website

Workshops:

For each component of the assignment, you participate in a workshop. You learn how to use the digital tools and produce part of each component in a facilitated lab environment. That is, we get together, learn and build together, troubleshoot together.

Topic	Lab
Understanding digital narratives	Before class: Students examine a gallery of Omeka exhibits. During class: Together, students and facilitator learn about the basics of Omeka and navigate the gallery of Omeka exhibits. In a shared Google doc, students collaboratively draw out the argument or narrative of each exhibit.

Creating a dataset with sample metadata	Before class: Students collect, in a Word document, some notes on specific items they would like to include in their website: photographs, sound files, interviews, digitized book pages. This Word document must include notes on at least 5 specific items, with hyperlinks to online materials about these items. During class: Students crosswalk their data into Dublin Core, learning about metadata in the process. Then students complete a spreadsheet of metadata for at least 5 items for their exhibit.
Research Week	This week has no in-class component. Students do research, assembling a 15-item spreadsheet with metadata for 15 Omeka items to illustrate their narrative.
Building the digital collection	Before class: Students read "Introduction to Omeka" tutorial and bring their spreadsheet of 15 items. All the fields of this spreadsheet must be filled in, following the instructions in the first workshop. During class: Using Omeka Gym sample data and exercises, students: • Get own Omeka site • Add one item • Add a collection • Batch-add multiple items
Digital Exhibit	Before class: Students write a 200-word summary of their argument or narrative. During class: Students create a digital exhibit with three pages.
Narrative	Students write the story of their book and incorporate the story into their Omeka exhibit.