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Chaucer in Italy, Boccaccio in Bedrooms

Alexandra Bolintineanu
and Andrea Loren Giamou
University of Toronto

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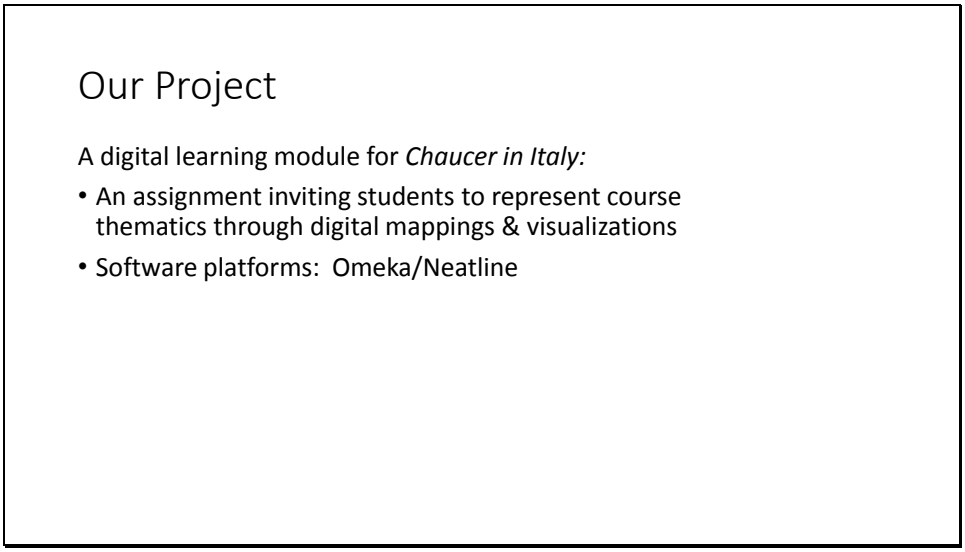

In this paper, we explore a digital learning module used in an advanced undergraduate literature course, *Chaucer in Italy*, at the University of Toronto. *Chaucer in Italy*, taught by William Robins, studies Geoffrey Chaucer's encounter with the literature and culture of medieval Italy. This digital learning module invited students to represent course thematics through digital mapping and visualizations. It was built around Omeka and Neatline. We use *Chaucer in Italy* as a case study in digital literary pedagogy. And we describe—from an instructor's and a student's perspective—how an Omeka learning module was built, and what lessons we, instructors and students, learned along the way. Drawing on this experience, we present Omeka Gym: a free digital toolkit for the integration of spatial digital humanities into undergraduate literature classrooms.11:38

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Presentation Road Map

- Learning Goals of the Assignment
- Origin
- Rationale: Why This Assignment
- Rationale: Why Omeka/Neatline Software Platform
- Assignment Structure:
  - Learning Module
  - Deliverables
- Post-mortem: What Went Right & What Went Wrong
- Improvements
- Omeka Gym
- Over to you

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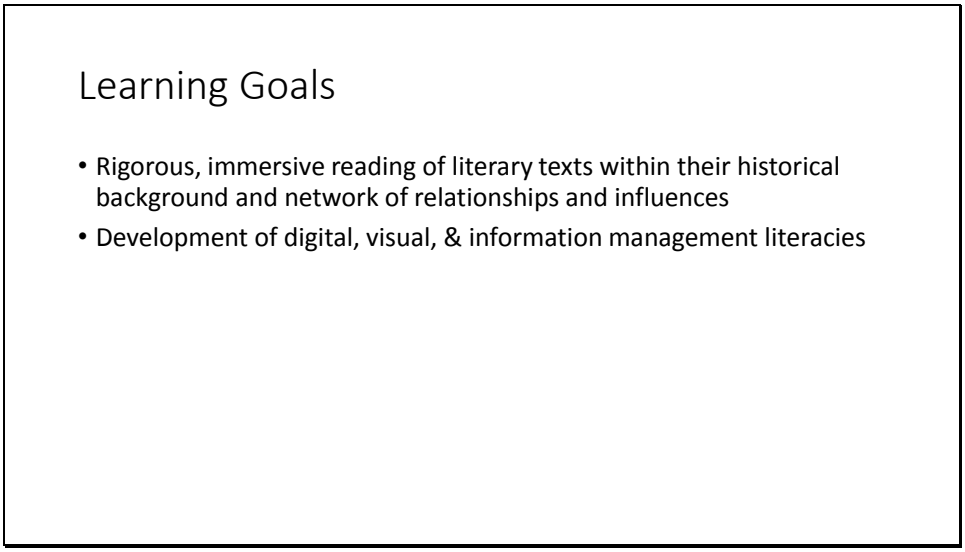

This translation of medieval texts into digital media had as its learning goals:
(1) rigorous, immersive reading of literary texts within their historical background and network of relationships and influences;
(2) The development of digital, visual, and information management literacies: that is, familiarizing students with a little bit of web development, visualization of complex information, and dipping a toe in the world of digital collections and metadata.

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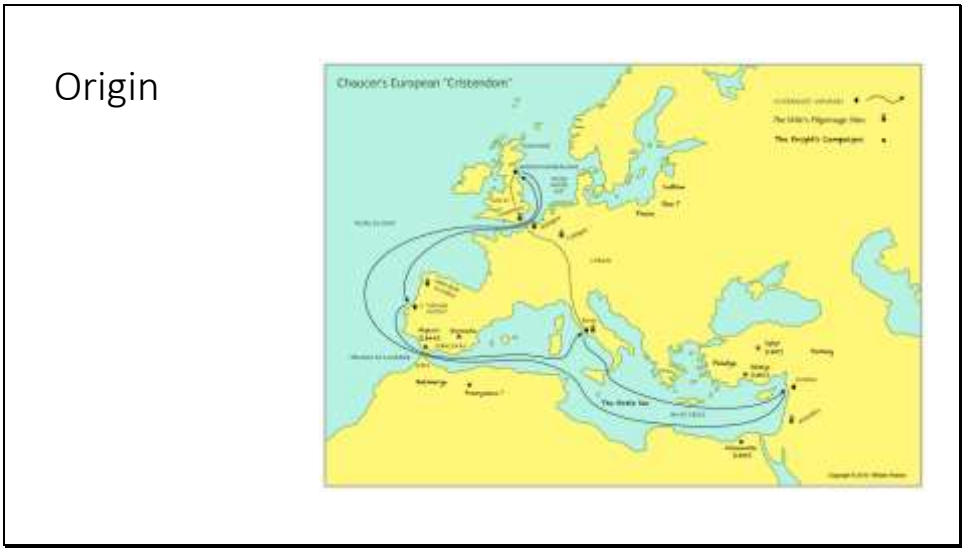

In 2014, I was Postdoctoral Fellow in Medieval Data Curation, holding a joint appointment at the Centre for Medieval Studies and the Jackman Humanities Institute. Andrea was an English Specialist and Classical Civilization major enrolled in Chaucer in Italy, an advanced fourth-year seminar course led by Professor Robins. Professor William Robins was interested in visualization and digital tools, especially their pedagogical uses; in past courses, he had used pen and paper visualization exercises, inviting students – for example—to trace the geography of the Canterbury Tales, and map the travels of Custance, the Wife of Bath, or the Knight, across historical maps. So he and I got together and discussed a digital learning module with similar goals. We collaborated to devise this digital module: Will Robins kindly invited me to give a series of workshops on digital visualization, metadata, Omeka, and Neatline in his Chaucer in Italy Course. I also provided an example assignment prompt. Drawing on these materials, Prof. Robins built a scaffolded assignment for Chaucer in Italy.

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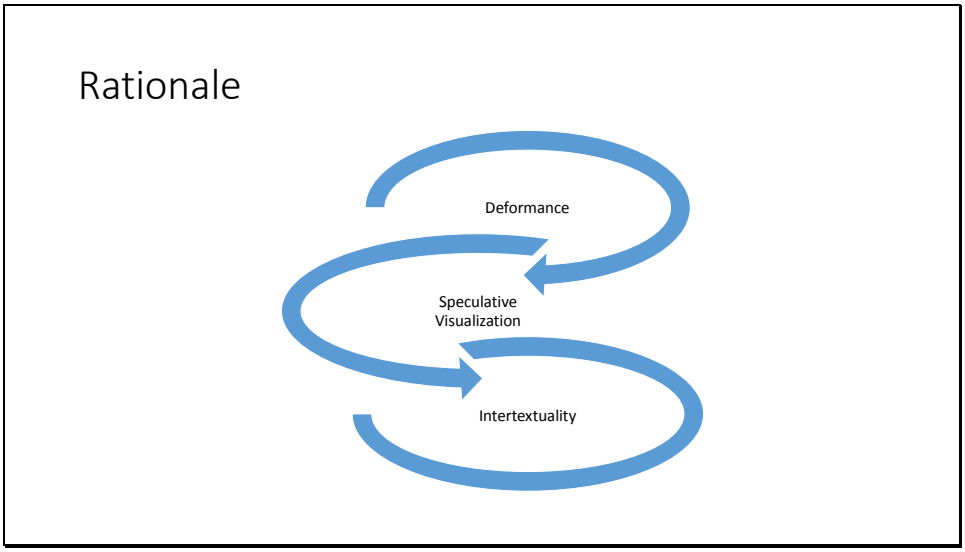

The assignment is built around charting literary thematics and intertextual relationships through digital archives and in time and space. To use Lisa Samuels' and Jerome McGann's term, the assignment is built around the notion of deformance, a portmanteau term coined by Lisa Samuels and Jerome McGann, a combination of "deform" and "performance." Deformance is an alternative strategy of interpreting a literary text by invading it and changing its shape: by reading it backwards line by line; by presenting poems as prose and prose as poems; or by reading exclusively a poem's nouns or its verbs. Deformance makes a familiar text strange, reopening its interpretive possibilities. Deformance of textual objects need not be limited to reading or punctuation: as Johanna Drucker and Bethany Nowviskie argue, deformance can take the shape of speculative visualization, humanist thinking about data, text, and culture through the creation of digital artifacts. And that is exactly what this learning module invites students to do: represent course thematics through digital mapping and visualization exercises; imagine intertextual dynamics at the intersection of maps, time, and archives.

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Why Omeka?

- Omeka = “Wordpress for museums”:

Omeka: sometimes called “Wordpress for museums,” is a free, open-source content management system for digital collections. It was created by the Roy Rosenzweig Centre for History and New Media, at George Mason University.

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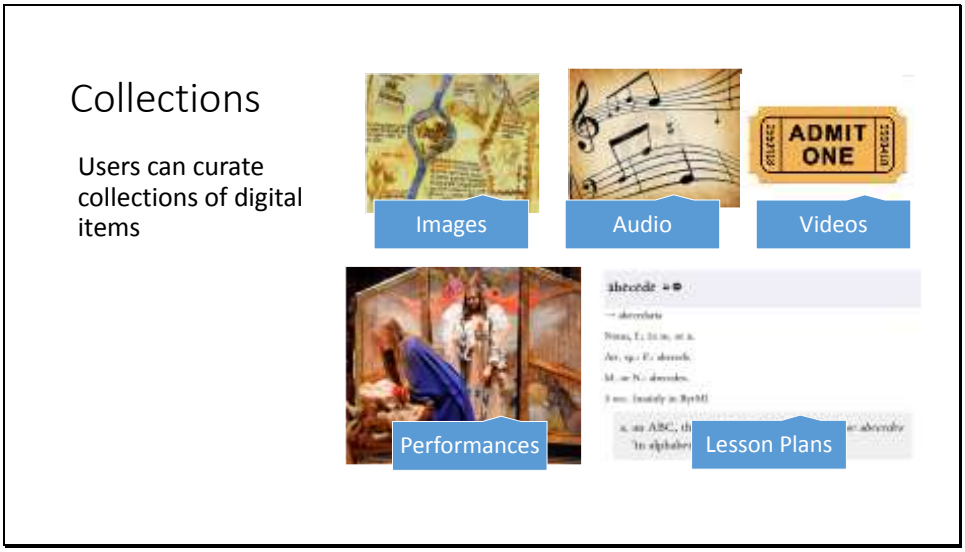

Omeka allows users to curate collections of digital artifacts, create metadata (in Dublin Core) about each item, and tell stories with these collections. Digital artifacts can include a variety of items: texts, images, sound recordings, videos, performances, lesson plans… allowing a great deal of flexibility.

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Neatline is an Omeka plugin; it allows users to tell stories with collections on maps and across timelines. Both Omeka and Neatline are supported by U of T Libraries: UTL (hat tip to Leslie Barnes, digital scholarship) set up a library Omeka instance for Chaucer in Italy.

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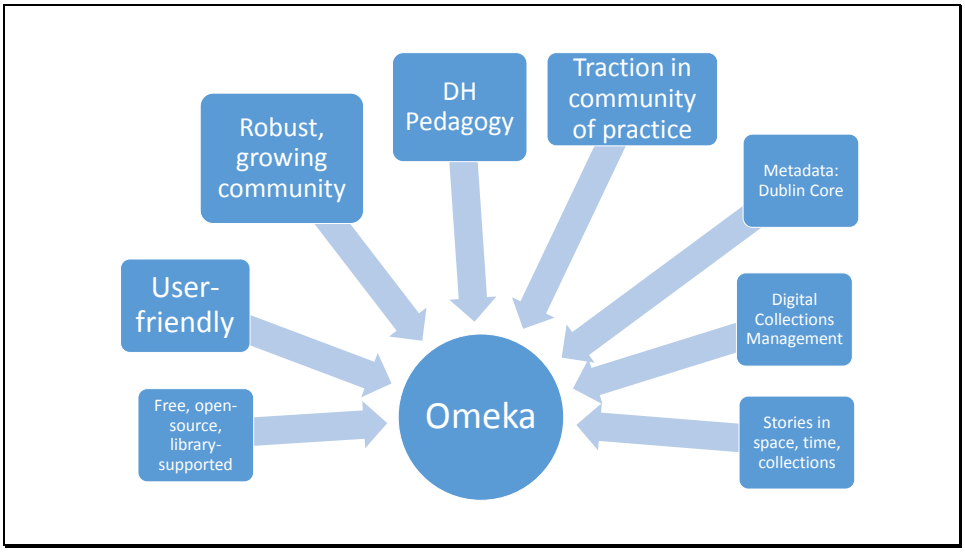

We chose this platform because Omeka and Neatline are free, open-source software, so they contribute to a good computing "ecosystem" for DH; because they are user-friendly, very well documented, and already widely in use in the DH community; because they are a good "gateway drug" for those who wish to learn about digital archives, collections, and metadata; and because they enable stories to be told at the intersection of space, time, and digital collections.

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Omeka is very popular in the DH pedagogy community: it has supported the collaboration between instructors and students to create public scholarship in history and literature. Especially relevant here is the work of Amanda French and Jeff McClurken, who used Omeka to teach digital history and reflect on teaching digital history; William G. Thomas, Patrick D. Jones, and Andrew Wittmer, who deployed Omeka in students' work with local history collections; Miriam Posner, who provides content-agnostic tutorials for learning Omeka; Stephanie A. *Schlitz* and Garrick S. *Bodine,* who used Omeka for a hybrid project—the creation of a digital archive from the ground up as a pedagogical exercise as well as a library project, in "The Martha Berry Digital Archive Project: A Case Study in Experimental pEDagogy." Last year, Melissa McAfee demonstrated the Scottish Chapbooks Project at the University of Guelph, a collaboration between special collections librarians and historians, in which students use Omeka to catalogue and build exhibits about 18th and 19th century chapbooks in Omeka. What our project brings is a focus on literature rather than history or bibliography; on conducting literary analysis using the Omeka/Neatline toolkit.

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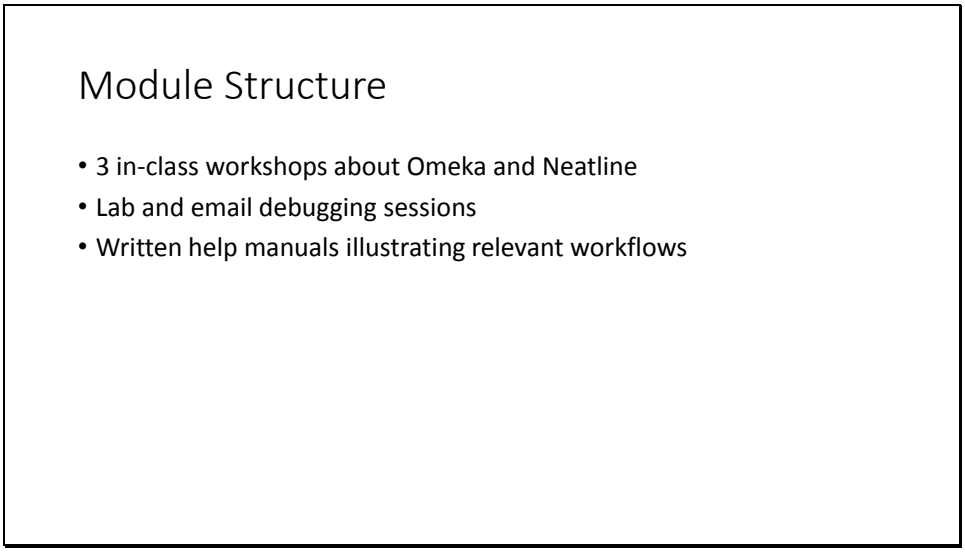

The learning module itself consisted of in-class, online, and written instruction: By Professor Robins' invitation, I ran 3 workshops on the technical workings of Omeka and Neatline, offered lab and email debugging sessions, and provided students with written help manuals for their workflows.

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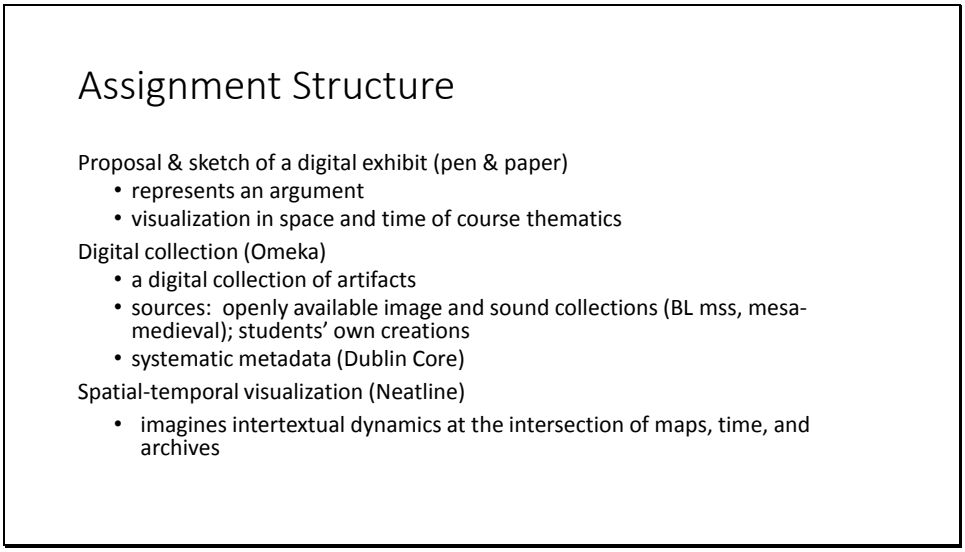

In turn, what students had to hand in was a scaffolded assignment: a pen-and-paper proposal & sketch of a digital exhibit -- a visualization in space and time of course thematics that had to encompass their argument; second, a digital collection of artifacts in Omeka, some from openly available online resources, others sound files and drawings of the students' own creation, all with systematic metadata in Dublin Core; and finally, based on this digital collection, a spatial-temporal

visualization in Neatline that imagines intertextual dynamics at the intersection of maps, time, and archives.

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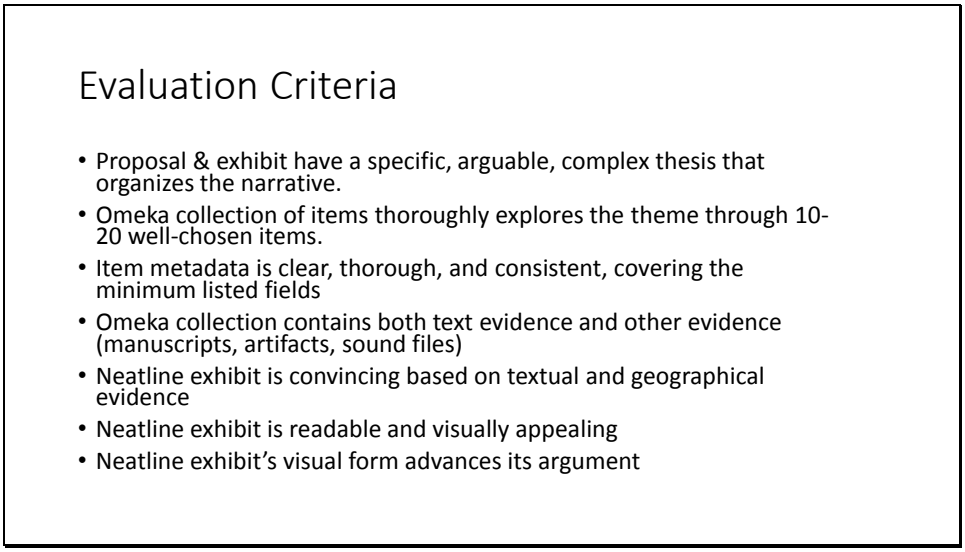

There were evaluation criteria that covered the proposal and exhibit, from its thesis and argument, to the details of the digital collection and its metadata, to the exhibit itself, its form as well as its intellectual content.

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What Went Wrong

- Software
- Use
- Assignment design

- Software issue: cross-browser inconsistencies in Neatline exhibits
- Omeka's user roles forced us to accept an uneasy compromise between what we needed to do and what we needed to prevent. Specifically, instructors needed to prevent students from accidentally deleting one another's items and exhibits. So students' role was that of "Contributors." But this same setting also prevented students from batch-uploading digital collections and from making their own exhibits and items public.
- The biggest nuisance was the time students spent debugging. So, while debugging helped them familiarize themselves with Omeka and Neatline, it also took away time from the literary material.

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Improvements

- Scope: feature a less complex exhibit (i.e. just Omeka, no Neatline)
- Platform: Omeka.net
- Flipped classroom: labs, not seminars
  - Set up an online mini-course on Omeka with in-class facilitation (Omeka Gym)
  - Do a small portion of each "step" of the scaffolded project in class

Next time, the assignment might feature a less complex exhibit (i.e. just Omeka, no Neatline), which would mean that everyone could get their own Omeka.net account and sidestep user role limitations. Alternatively, the learning module would be fully collaborative; students would be making one exhibit, rather than individual exhibits, so they would have full permission to modify one another's materials and thus full powers over the site.

Instead of offering technical seminars and help material, I would "flip the classroom" and run the seminars as labs: I have built a resource called Omeka Gym, with exercises and materials. I would offer Omeka Gym as a facilitated mini-course on Omeka, and do a small portion of each "step" of the scaffolded project in class.

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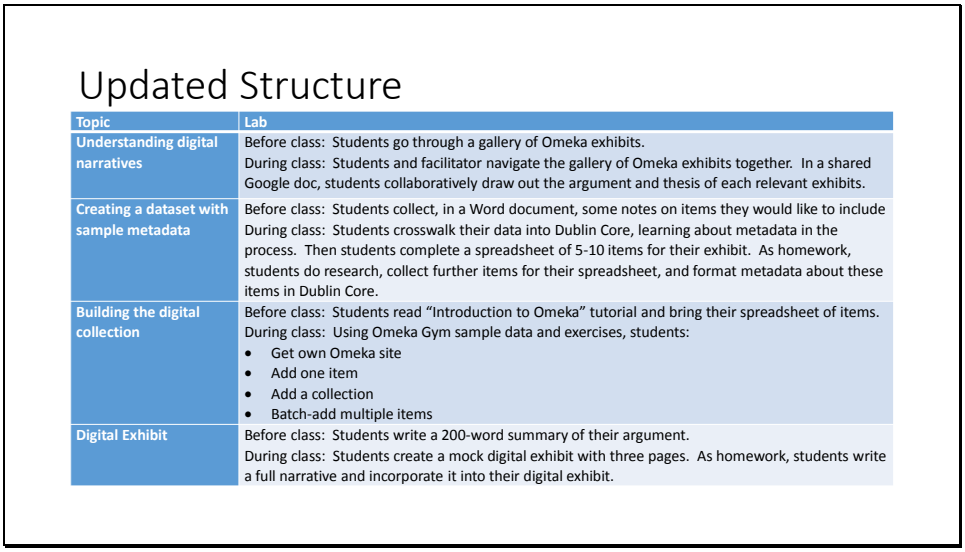

Using Omeka Gym as a learning resource, the workshops would proceed as follows:

- The first workshop takes place before students write the exhibit proposal. Before class: Students go through a gallery of Omeka exhibits; during class: Students and facilitator navigate the gallery of Omeka exhibits together. In a shared Google doc, students collaboratively draw out the argument and thesis of each relevant exhibits.

2) The second workshop takes place before students build their digital collection. Before class: Students read "Introduction to Omeka" tutorial. During class: Using Omeka Gym sample data and exercises, students:

- Get own Omeka site
- Add one item
- Add a collection
- Batch-add multiple items based on a research collection

Finally, the third workshop takes place before students build their digital exhibit. Before class: Students write a 200-word summary of their argument.
During class: Students create a mock digital exhibit with three pages, advancing that argument.

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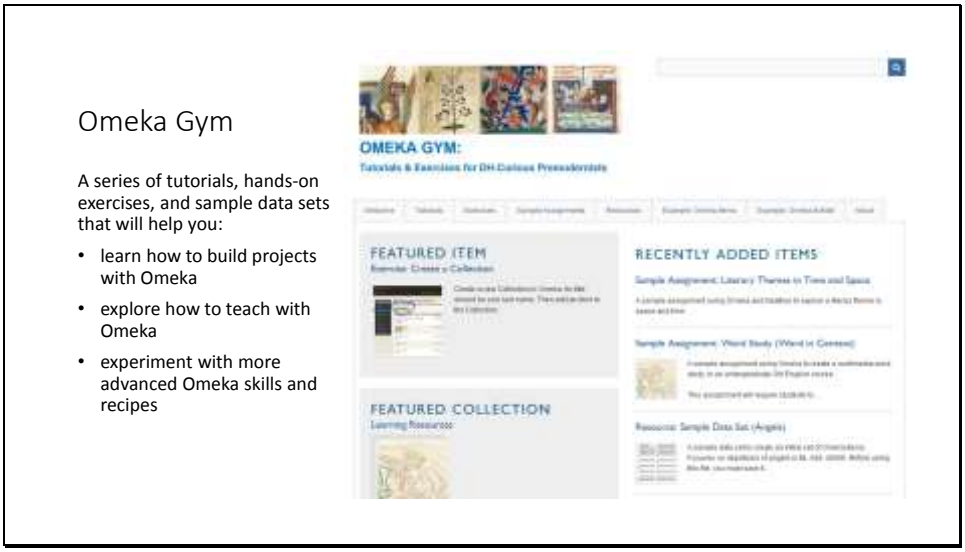

To facilitate this flipping, I built a new resource: Omeka Gym, a site with tutorials, exercises, sample assignments, and resources, which allows especially pre-modernists to experiment learning/teaching with Omeka by building collections and exhibits with digital surrogates of premodern artifacts.

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Omeka Gym

- Tutorials

Omeka Gym has tutorials…

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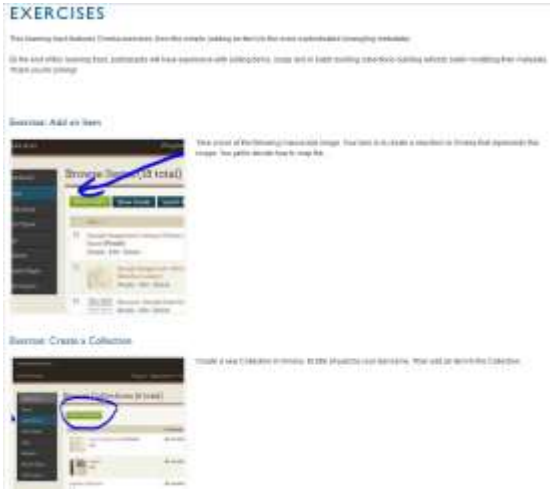
Omeka Gym

- Hands-on exercises



… hands-on exercises

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Omeka Gym

- Sample items based on depictions of angels in BL Additional 42555 (researcher's notes)

Sample Omeka items based on researcher notes…

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Omeka Gym

- Sample literature assignments

… and, for instructors, sample literature assignments using Omeka. These will be available for download, CC-BY, by October 2015.

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Conclusion

- Assignment had mixed success: next time, thsite development vs. engagement with course material
- Make the digital project outcomes less ambitious, so as to leave more time for the literary studies-related learning outcomes;
- Flip the classroom to reduce students' time spent learning the platforms;
- Incorporate more collaborative speculation and critical thinking about the arguments made and the stories told with digital collections.