Putting Edmonton on the (Google) Map

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In this poster/demo, we will describe and analyze the experience of teaching English 486, "Producing the City." An experimental course co-taught between Dr Heather Zwicker, Associate Professor of English, and Dr Maureen Engel, E-Learning Manager for the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta, English 486 is a hands-on, theoretically grounded capstone course in multimedia installations that takes the city of Edmonton, Canada as inspiration and object. Based on principles of collaboration and student-centered learning, the course takes the city as its primary text. Grounded in short Edmonton narratives and a range of urban theory, the course listened to the city, looked at the city, moved through the city, and explored the meanings of home. The sensory experiences of sound, sight, and movement were translated through student projects using digital photography, simple mapping, soundscapes, and video. Each of these assignments served as a scaffolding exercise to prepare students for the final collaborative project: a KML-authored installation designed for Google Earth.

This course did not take GIS as its object of study; rather, it took the city as its object and asked students to use various multimedia tools to express their critical and creative engagement with that city and its narratives. Various assignments asked the students to demonstrate and explore their learning through digital tools, not to engage with and analyse the potential of the tools themselves. We asked them to learn new ways of expressing their ideas, and to discover the affordances of digital technologies to their critical apparatus. The course raised multiple questions about discipline, pedagogy, theory, and technology. Our presentation offers a critical commentary on our successes and shortcomings, and demonstrates the importance - and surprising payoffs - of doing this sort of work with undergraduate students in the traditionally low-tech field of English literature.

Our poster presentation / demo will have three components. The first is an overview of the course, describing its intellectual aims and technical models. We explore some concepts that are often taken for granted: what is a map, how does it organize information, how does the concept of "space" translate into "place"? We overview digitally mapped urban literature in sites like Imagining Toronto, City of Memory (New York), Hitotoki (Tokyo, Shanghai, Paris, Sofia), Concrete Dialogues (Perth Australia), and Artangel (London), as well as acoustic ecology sites like the London Sound Survey, the Montreal and New York Sound Maps, as well as the Open Street Map project. Sites like these open up both the concept of mapping and the conventions of narrative in interesting ways, playing with the synchronicity of the traditional map and the linearity of conventional narrative. And yet for reasons to do with Edmonton's scarce representations and relative youth, such models could not be translated wholesale into our course.

The second section of our poster presentation turns to the pedagogical implications of team-teaching digital media under the aegis of the English Department. Working with digital media requires both instructors and students to shift their expectations. Whereas the pedagogy we're familiar with frequently measures student learning by verbal articulation, whether oral or written, we instructors had to learn to put "discovery learning" to work in classrooms by letting students explore on their own, to a certain extent. The biggest challenge for the students in English 486 was not the technology per se, but rather the nature of the assignments. Instead of sole-authored papers, for instance, students had to learn to work collaboratively on sustained projects over the course of the semester. The course also demanded unfamiliar ways of reading and writing, in addition to mastering the specific digital tools. Students had to figure out which rhetorical techniques are transferable and adaptable to the digital realm, and which are not. They had to exercise critical skills on the visual culture ubiquitous to

their personal, if not their academic, experience. Our presentation pays particular attention to the ways in which the students surprised and surpassed our expectations, and the key lessons both they and we learned from the shift in genre from the research essay to the digital story/argument. Key to this aspect of our presentation will be demos of actual student projects.

Part three will offer a critical analysis of the digital tools we used for representing Edmonton. In particular, we evaluate Google Maps and Google Earth as a technical platform for this kind of pedagogical work. Publicly available and free of charge, Google Maps and Google Earth have much to recommend them; they present a low barrier to entry, both financially and technologically. At the level of politics, relying on Google for fundamental courseware is problematic – asking our students to expose their work to a massive commercial enterprise based in a foreign country was a difficult decision to make. At the level of pedagogy, any digital application will present students with specific narrative constraints – Google Earth can only *do* what Google Earth can do, and would that be sufficient for the task we set for our students? We will assess the extent to which these tools are enabling or limiting, particularly to students crossing genres from traditional academic prose. The hypercities tool (`www.hypercities.com`) was evolving in beta as the course progressed, and though it ultimately would have served our pedagogical goals more satisfyingly, reliability and practicality carried the day. That Google's ubiquity and stability were significant determinants in our pedagogical practice is instructive, if disheartening.

Looking back, the course demanded much of both its instructors and its students. The quality of the work the students produced, however, and the extent of their learning proved that using digital tools pushed students to go farther than conventional tools could have.

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