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Madeline B. Gangnes
University of Florida

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Togetherness with the Past: Literary Pedagogy and the Digital Archive

Madeline B. Gangnes
UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

*Archival materials are invaluable to an understanding of the historical, cultural, and material contexts in which literary texts were published. Materiality, paratextual elements, and other key characteristics of literature cannot be discerned from recent editions. Yet original and rare versions of literary texts are difficult or impossible for most scholars, let alone their students, to access. Digital facsimiles provide opportunities to examine archival texts over the Internet, alleviating logistical and financial barriers. In *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (2001), Carolyn Steedman writes: “The Archive is a place in which people can be alone with the past” (81); archives are generally thought of as quiet, solitary environments. However, digital archives afford a communal engagement with the past. In this essay, I describe my experiences teaching British literature through digital facsimiles of first or early printings of novels and poetry that are available online. I draw on my observations as an educator, as well as those relayed by my students, to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of using such archives in undergraduate literature courses. I analyze what it means to be together with the past, and how a shared experience of the Archive can be developed and improved through digital resources.*

The Archive is a place in which people can be alone with the past....
–Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*

Archives are places of quiet contemplation. There, one can commune with history through the documents and objects left behind by the dead or entrusted to the care of others. If a library is, as it has often been described, a kind of secular church or cathedral, then an archive is a chapel. Archives are tended to by an order of devoted adherents. Scholars make pilgrimages to archives, spending hours, days, weeks, months in quiet solitude, perusing the shelves, cartons, and binders, searching for knowledge and inspiration. There is a profound

and often gratifying aloneness to be found in archives.

Yet the library-as-church, the archive-as-chapel, also evokes a sense of community. Using archives need not be a solitary activity; it can be a collective experience. Just as there is value in congregational worship in addition to solitary prayer, there is a value to being not “alone with the past,” as Carolyn Steedman writes, but *together* with it, in engaging with the Archive as a community of scholars (Steedman 2011, 81). Digital archives afford opportunities for this shared engagement in ways in which physical archives cannot.¹ A group of scholars may visit an archive together, even huddle around an archival object in the same room, but simultaneous engagement with the text is not possible in this context. Through digital archives, a large group of scholars across the globe may examine archival materials in facsimile simultaneously. Concerns of scarcity and physical space that are associated with physical archives become largely inconsequential. The digital Archive becomes a place of *togetherness*.

This kind of communal experience of the Archive is valuable to scholars at all levels of study, but it is essential to the most effective incorporations of archival materials in literary pedagogy. Drawing on archival materials helps students engage with the historical, cultural, and material contexts of the time periods in which works of literature were published. John S. North argues that when reading archival documents (in his case, nineteenth-century periodicals) for literary scholarship “we find ourselves more deeply immersed in the day than we could be by any other means” (North 1978, 6). Likewise, Jim Mussell (2012) observes that literary archives provide access to information regarding “alternative forms in which a text was published” as well as “the broader historical culture in which such forms were meaningful” (204). In the case of serialized fiction or other texts that first appeared in periodicals or collections, such “alternative forms” of canonical texts were published alongside a host of other texts and paratextual materials. Students and scholars alike should be made aware that literary texts that are removed from the material contexts of their prior presentations to readers are divorced from the signs of their full cultural and aesthetic meanings.

While a digital facsimile is certainly not identical to the “original” document, facsimiles can, and do, help readers become “more deeply immersed in the day” in which literary texts were published.² As Mussell argues, using archival materials for literary scholarship can be “an attempt to reconstruct a lost context,” which is especially important in cases where significant edits and/or additions were made for later editions of a text, or for texts that were originally accompanied by illustrations (Mussell 2012, 204). These and related questions are of particular significance for texts which are published in serialized, “pre-original” versions prior to their publication in other forms.³ Digital resources, then, “provide a different way to approach” what Mussell refers to as the “absent context” of literary works that is diminished or stripped in more recent editions (Mussell 2012, 204). This is not to say that later editions do not have their own advantages; in fact, critical or “authoritative” editions are immensely helpful in scholarship and pedagogy. However, the choice to use any one edition over others will necessarily involve differences that significantly influence a reader’s experience of the text. Likewise, when a group of scholars favors a particular edition in discussions of a text, the discourse surrounding that text will be similarly influenced.

A classroom—whether physical or virtual—is populated by a community of learners. For the sake of simplicity, consistency, and clarity, students in a given course generally read the same texts together according to a shared schedule. If archival materials (even in

facsimile) offer a more complete view of a text and its contexts, and learning as a community enhances students' understanding of a text, then it follows that digital archives are an invaluable resource for literary pedagogy. Providing students with a means through which to recontextualize fiction allows them the opportunity to more fully immerse themselves in the period in which works of fiction were written, which can lead to a greater and more nuanced understanding of the texts themselves.

In this essay, I first detail my efforts to foster this kind of learning environment when teaching nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British literature using digital archives. I then offer my observations as an instructor, as well as my students' responses, to provide a picture of the benefits of using digital archives for studying literature from these time periods. Finally, I address the drawbacks of using such archives in this way. By describing my approach and the outcomes of my undergraduate literature courses, I provide concrete examples of how digital archives can and cannot, and perhaps should and should not, be used for literary pedagogy. I hope to not only present a model for how educators at any level of instruction can create a sense of "togetherness with the Archive" through the use of digital facsimiles in their classrooms, but also make a convincing case for the merits of doing so. Further, I argue that the use of digital archives, whether by students or professional scholars, illuminates as much about the nature and value of archives themselves as it does the content and context of archival materials.

Teaching Together

Archivists, historians, literary scholars, and other specialists are well aware that the ever-increasing availability of digital archival content on the Internet has enabled research that could not have been conducted even several years ago. Through my own scholarship on late-Victorian periodicals I have become increasingly aware of the benefits and drawbacks of these materials and the level of engagement required to effectively navigate and make use of them. Though I began working with digital archives specifically to access illustrations printed alongside serialized Victorian fiction, I have begun to see these archives as objects of study in their own right rather than simply as conduits through which to access literary materials. Given the benefit of digital archives to my own work, as well as my budding interest in archives, it seemed not only natural, but vital, to incorporate digital archival materials in my teaching. If these resources were valuable to me, I reasoned, they would certainly be valuable to my students. The results of the courses I designed around these materials far exceeded my expectations, for both good and ill.

To date, I have made extensive use of digital archives in teaching two undergraduate courses:⁴ a Freshman-level composition course I titled "Writing About Late-Victorian Serialized Fiction and Periodicals" and my university's Sophomore-level survey of British literature from 1750 to the present, which I subtitled "The British Canon in the Digital Archive." The composition course necessitated the use of digital archives because I hoped to mimic the Victorian experience of reading fiction serially, and to require students to engage with the materials that were published alongside serialized fiction, not just the main texts themselves. Today, serialized fiction is almost always read and taught through single-volume versions in which the text's original segments are collected, revised, and often expanded.

Scholars of Victorian periodicals have long sought ways to somehow recreate the experience of reading serially when teaching Victorian fiction. In *The Victorian Serial*

(1991), Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund describe the benefits and opportunities of what they call a “re-creation” of the serial reading experience, especially in classrooms (275-78). Teaching serials in installments, they argue, allows “modern students to recover the excitement, suspense, and involvement that characterized so much of the nineteenth-century literary experience” (276). Teaching serially also significantly changes the texts: “New parts of the work demand and receive attention along the way of reading, and the questions asked about literature before it is completed turn out to vary in unexpected ways from established concerns” (276). In designing my composition course, I closely adhered to Hughes and Lund’s advice for teaching serialized texts during one academic semester, but my strategies for teaching serially were greatly facilitated by the use of online digital scans of Victorian periodicals, which were not available to Hughes and Lund in the 1990s.

I chose the readings for each course guided in part by the selection of periodicals that were readily available online. My goal for the composition course was to include major readings that spanned not only a range of literary genres, but also a range of periodicals that varied widely in format, content, and audience. I also deliberately chose primary texts that continue to be widely read in the twenty-first century in order to show the ways in which reading them as digital facsimiles may influence readers’ understanding and interpretation of them. I had specific authors I wanted to teach, but sometimes one text was chosen over another because of its availability; for instance, it is much easier to find a digital facsimile of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Kidnapped* than *Treasure Island*.⁵ I approached my course design with certain readings in mind, but archives had the final say.

Digital archives also aid in the creation of atypical reading schedules. To underscore the fact that Victorian Britons read multiple periodicals every week or month, I chose to have my composition students alternate between two texts at a time rather than reading a full novel before moving on to the next. I paired the texts thematically to facilitate broader discussions each week rather than considering each novel as a self-contained text. For example, several installments of *Kidnapped* (1896)⁶ were covered in the same week as several *Sherlock Holmes*⁷ stories, allowing for an examination of how attitudes about “children’s literature” and “genre fiction” differed in the nineteenth century from twentieth-century classifications. The same was done for Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899)⁸ and H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1897)⁹ with reference to nineteenth-century imperialism, then *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)¹⁰ and poems and short stories by New Woman writers from *The Yellow Book*¹¹ related to Aestheticism. We also examined 1880s-90s political cartoons from the satirical magazine *Punch* and selected articles from 1888 issues of the monthly women’s-interest magazine *The Woman’s World*. The semester was not long enough for a reading schedule that would match the texts’ original publication schedules, but alternating back and forth between multiple texts, and accessing them in separate issues of periodicals, gave students a sense of a Victorian’s experience reading several serialized texts each week. It also drew attention to the fact that these texts were not read in one sitting, but instead were digested over the course of weeks or months. Digital facsimiles of each individual magazine or newspaper issue forced students to “pick up” each installment and read it as a discrete part rather than grouping installments together.

This atypical reading schedule that digital archives enabled created a kind of solidarity among the students in my composition course. Hughes and Lund speak of a “sense of community” that reading serially creates: the “class reading *together* rather than isolated,

separate individuals, generates associations and connections for students that are less easy to develop when whole works are read sequentially” (Hughes and Lund 1991, 276, emphasis mine). Reading serially encourages a *togetherness* with the text, wherein students empathize about frustrating cliffhangers, for example, or share the unexpected disorientation of switching back and forth between readings. Writing in 1991, Hughes and Lund were likely dividing bound printed novels into short sections to be read throughout the course of the semester. Digital scans of the original periodicals, by contrast, not only provide opportunities for mimicking the pace of the texts’ serialization, but also facsimiles of the material contexts in which they were published. Reading major texts alongside their respective periodicals’ paratextual elements—illustrations, advertisements, editorial notes, and other fictional works and essays—enables students, individually and as a group, to make connections between the canonical texts and related elements that are usually excluded from collected volumes.

I fostered a collective engagement with the periodicals themselves by requiring students to reference and analyze paratextual materials from Victorian periodicals in their assignments. Most of the graded coursework was longer essays, but I also assigned six short discussion board posts: one for each of the six major periodicals from which our readings were taken.¹² Since the enrollment for this course was seventeen students, we were able to examine roughly one hundred articles, essays, poems, novel extracts, short stories, advertisements, and other periodical materials over the course of the semester on top of the texts assigned in the syllabus.¹³ Students briefly summarized their chosen texts for the class and asked each other questions or made observations about others’ choices. I encouraged the students to respond to each other’s posts through threaded comments—another way in which digital technologies facilitated a collective approach, especially for students who were shy about speaking during seminars.

Through these response posts, topics that were glossed over or absent from the novels covered in this “writing about literature” course became foregrounded. Reframing the course’s focus in this way organically created a historical and cultural lens through which to approach canonical works of fiction. Patterns quickly emerged in the “matter” chosen by the students for their response posts. Popular topics included animals, unusual technologies or inventions, fashion, travel, popular culture (e.g., Victorian-era celebrities), war stories, and/or any text accompanied by eye-catching illustrations or photographs. Some of these themes were in evidence in the course’s primary texts, but most would have been overlooked had we not engaged with these hundred additional texts. This organic method of recovering “absent contexts” could not have been achieved solely through lectures or isolated research projects; it was made possible by the collective experience of students mining digital archival materials for myriad fragments of late-Victorian culture *together*.

Given the positive outcomes of the composition class, I chose to foreground digital archival materials in my British literature survey and framed the course through the lens of archive theory and discussions of digital archives. On the first day of class, I asked my students to spend five minutes writing out a response to the following prompt:

Should books be available to read for free (online, in libraries, etc.), or is it reasonable to ask people to pay a fee to access them? Why or why not?

Consider:

- If you wanted to read a book or poem for free, how would you try to access it?
- What regulations, laws, technological considerations, and/or other factors might make it difficult to access a book or poem for free?
- What would you do if you couldn't easily access the material for free?
- How would you feel if you were required to read something, but you couldn't afford to pay for it?

I then asked each student to share what they had written with the class. Some students strongly felt that it is important for everyone to have free or cheap access to knowledge. Others—especially those who were also taking STEM classes—focused on the financial burden of textbook costs. Still, some worried that freely available knowledge might undercut writers' ability to earn a living from their work. By the end of the first lesson, the class had come to a consensus that recurred throughout the semester: knowledge should be freely or cheaply available to everyone, but someone should make sure that the producers of knowledge are paid for their contributions.

Using this exercise as a jumping-off point for the course, I emphasized the fact that format and materiality significantly impact a reader's experience of a text. The first readings I assigned for homework were Brewster Kahle's keynote address "Universal Access to All Knowledge" (2007) and Emily Monks-Leeson's article "Archives on the Internet: Representing Contexts and Provenance from Repository to Website" (2011), along with a directive to "Take steps to protect your eyes while reading digital materials!" and links to several articles and applications on how to reduce eye strain while reading on digital devices. I repeatedly drew my students' attention to differences between first (or early) printings of texts and later versions (word and punctuation changes, different titles, and so forth), as well as illustrations and other paratextual materials that do not accompany the texts in other formats, e.g., a Norton anthology that is routinely used for the survey, or an online text version found on a site such as Project Gutenberg. I trained them to become attuned to the presence and importance of visual details that suggest a text's material features, and prompted them to consider the relationship between materiality and meaning-making in literary texts.

Similar to my composition course, I assigned four discussion board posts about using archives: three as responses to the digital archives through which we accessed our readings, and one response to visiting our university's Special Collections, which houses a large collection of rare and first- or early-edition volumes of British literature from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Special Collections archivists prepared a presentation and a selection of books based on my syllabus for the class to peruse during their visit. I instructed my students to examine the various books and choose one as the topic of their response post. There were awed murmurs and expressions of disbelieving delight when they were told they could touch and read the books without wearing gloves. Many students took photographs of

their favorites, huddling in pairs or small groups around particularly impressive pieces like a set of first-edition volumes of *Northanger Abbey*. One particularly excited student posted a series of photos to her Snapchat Story. By the end of the period, several of them had made plans to return to the Special Collections together to see other books, and later confirmed that they had indeed come back on their own time, both individually and in pairs. Again, the Archive promoted togetherness, both in person and over social media.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Special Collections response posts reflected an excitement about archives that was not present in the students' responses to digital facsimiles. There was interest before, but now there was passion. Several students expressed Steedman's notion of being "with the past": "it was almost as if I was transported back in time," said one student, while another recounted her profound connection with an early edition of Robert Burns's poetry:

[W]hen I held that fragile book in my hand, it felt like a priceless treasure. Upon opening the book, I felt as if I was going back in time to the period in which this edition was publish[ed]. ... The book, with its barely attached cover and the feel of the many years that have passed since its publication, made me realize the power of what a paper, a pen, and a creative mind can do. Feeling the book and the pages, smelling the odor of many years, and making the words out silently made me feel a sensation of 'belonging' to the book.

The students' visceral responses to archival objects during the Special Collections visit ramped up the paper v. digital debate familiar to casual readers, literary scholars, and archivists alike. Up to that point, the class had discussed pros and cons of digital archives and expressed preferences of one over the other in terms of their individual reading experiences. After the visit, they became more personally invested in the strengths and weaknesses of each, and were more outspoken about what they felt was "lost" when reading a digital facsimile of a text compared with a physical archival copy. The student who wrote about Burns remarked, "If I were able to access the texts only through [an] online archive, whether it was a digital scan, photograph, or videos, I would not be able to feel the same way that I did." Others wrote that digital scans cause the reader to "lose important information," that "the size of the book is lost," and (echoed by multiple students across response papers) "it's not the same." Firsthand experience of physical archival materials made the students palpably aware of the privilege that comes with access to archives, both physical and digital.

Questions of access became even more complicated when the class's chronological engagement with primary texts passed 1922: the current cut-off year for Public Domain status of published works. The only freely-accessible original scans of a first edition of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) are presented one page at a time through Woolf Online.¹⁴ I was not cruel enough to subject my students to that torturous prospect, so I only asked them to spend a few minutes looking at scans of the first edition, then read the book however they chose: any edition of a physical copy, eBook, online, etc. There was a palpable sense of relief among the students at this freedom; no longer would they be chained to digital devices. Some went out of their way to buy a hard copy, even with free or cheap digital versions of the text available online. I used the Public Domain cut-off as an opportunity to discuss copyright law, returning to Brewster Kahle's "Universal Access to All Knowledge" to

see if students' attitudes about freely-accessible knowledge had changed since the first week of the course. In this way, the question of access that I posed at the beginning of the semester came full circle; a relatively standard survey of British literature also served as a class on the social, political, financial, and logistical considerations of the Archive.

A Collective Vision

Many of us who work with digital archives initially find ourselves seduced by the seemingly infinite possibilities afforded by the resources at our fingertips. A variation on the following notice appears in the syllabi for both courses in which I have used digital archives: "All materials will be provided by instructor; there is no need to purchase textbooks." The notion of a "free" (in terms of course materials) class is, understandably, a relief to students who are burdened by rising textbook costs, but it also hints at a kind of future intellectual utopia where all learning materials are affordably and easily accessible. There is something powerfully alluring about Brewster Kahle's vision of achieving "universal access to all knowledge." Kahle is the founder of the Internet Archive (Archive.org), of which I make extensive use in my research and teaching. In "Universal Access to All Knowledge" (2007), he argues that access should be at the core of efforts to digitize and distribute content. Kahle says that "democratic ideals ... are baked into" archiving as a profession; archivists should strive to make archival materials freely and widely accessible to the public (30). Assigning Kahle's essay at the beginning of the course set an idealistic tone for the semester, which then became productively complicated and challenged as the class progressed.

As my students soon learned, no archive is truly free. In fact, Kahle provides a detailed account of the specific costs of digitizing documents and maintaining servers. The significant operating costs of the venues through which my students accessed digital materials are only made possible by donations, grants, and other sources of outside funding.¹⁵ While most of the texts we examined are well out of copyright, there is still a financial burden associated with making the materials available. In my survey course lectures, I therefore made sure to point out which archive(s) hosted the day's reading(s), which archive the original text belonged to, and who had digitized it. I asked my students to read the mission statements of major digital archives and repositories and encouraged them to explore the materials offered beyond the assigned readings. I impressed upon my students the fact that these resources had been made available because the owners of the materials felt that it was important for them to be made accessible. The methods and avenues through which texts make their way to readers are often taken for granted, as are the efforts of the editors, publishers, archivists, librarians, and other people through whom texts pass before they are read by an audience.

Framing students' experiences of digital archival materials through the lens of archives' creation and maintenance encouraged them to consider the purpose and goals of digitization projects. Most of my students were immediately attentive to the advantages of facsimiles over plain-text versions of novels and poetry, either online or printed. They quickly picked up on one of my main reasons for using digital archives: the material aspects of a text that can be discerned through facsimiles. One student echoed North¹⁶ by observing that a scanned image of a book "created a much more immersive viewing experience" than the plain-text version, and that visible "details such as transparency in the pages and smudges along the text create the illusion of reading the physical edition" in ways that other formats do not. Another said that a high-quality scan allowed her to "see the texture of the pages and if I tried I could

imagine what they would feel like if I had that physical version....” Other students praised logistical advantages of digital versions in general, such as the ease of accessing a digital version compared with hunting down a physical book, and interface-related capabilities like zooming in on images to see small details, and, of course, searchable OCR text to help them find specific scenes or lines from a given text.

Beyond the convenience of digital materials and the ability of high-quality scans to hint at physical materiality of printed works, digital facsimiles make available key characteristics of texts that may be omitted in later editions. This is vital when the physical version of a text incorporates visual elements beyond text. In the case of William Blake, for example, I had the students view several different versions of the same four poems. There are wonderful printed facsimiles of Blake’s work in circulation today, but most are based on one particular manuscript, and Blake’s images can vary significantly from set to set. Furthermore, a facsimile of Blake’s work is still far easier to find in print than the illustrations that originally accompanied works like *Kidnapped*, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, *The War of the Worlds*, *Goblin Market*, and *Through the Looking-Glass*. Examining digital scans of these and other illustrated readings allowed for close visual analyses and discussions about the interplay between text and image. The ability to read texts that are—with a few exceptions, e.g., *Through the Looking-Glass*—now published without illustrations was crucial to understanding the imagetextual meaning-making that occurs in early editions of the texts.

Meaning-making in literary texts is also heavily influenced by adjacent and paratextual materials, which is why it is extremely advantageous that digital archives allow *browsing*. A class on Victorian periodicals is not possible without access to original editions or high-quality facsimiles of complete (or near complete) issues of the periodicals. The physical originals are generally housed in archives, which makes them essentially inaccessible to undergraduate students unless their institution’s Special Collections happens to have them. Paper photocopies have been used for classes on this subject in the past, but that solution is only feasible for excerpts. The ability to access entire issues of periodicals or collected volumes enables students and scholars to browse through the materials. Interfaces on major online archives generally have a viewing option that arranges the images in a way that mimics a book or magazine—in some cases in a sophisticated enough fashion that small but important details such as which pages face one another are preserved. Readers can click through large volumes and examine materials that surround a specific serialized text. This not only places course readings in a concrete historical, cultural, and material context that is lacking when they are reprinted, but also gives students the opportunity to discover related texts that have not been assigned (and might not be assigned in any literature course).

The digital Archive, then, is undoubtedly rich with possibilities, especially for scholarship related to literature. It provides a means of easily and affordably discovering or rediscovering content and contexts from which texts have been separated in later printings. It creates a space in which students can explore and share key aspects of texts that are difficult to access anywhere else. That said, most digital resources are far from perfect, and using them comes with a host of difficulties. Teaching with digital archives makes abundantly clear that the idealism of Kahle’s “Universal Access to All Knowledge” is grounded by the reality that archives—both physical and digital—are tied to a complicated and treacherous web of financial, logistical, and ethical concerns (Monks-Leeson 2011).

A Shared Reality

The drawbacks and complications related to using digital archives for course materials are by no means negligible. Several of these complications are linked to the same notice from my syllabi cited above: “All materials will be provided by instructor; there is no need to purchase textbooks.” The word “purchase” gestures to the financial considerations linked to digital archives. As stated above, no archive is truly free. I did “provide” the course materials for my classes in the sense that I collected digital files and links to websites in a centralized location. I did not, however, provide the resources required to read them, nor was I responsible for the financial burden of hosting the materials. Even if access to digital archives is freely (or cheaply) available to students, it still involves substantial financial costs. At a major American research university, it is generally safe to assume that students will have access to a laptop computer or tablet that they can bring to class and use to read the course materials at home. Failing that, they are at least guaranteed the use of a computer at a campus library or media laboratory. However, this is not true of every college and university, even those of the comparably prosperous global North. Even when library computers are available, it would be unfair to expect students to spend hours reading on a computer screen in a public space. Students have the option to print out materials, but that solution assumes they can easily and affordably print hundreds of pages over the course of the semester. “There is no need to purchase textbooks” does not mean that there is no need to purchase *anything*; the student must have already paid for the means to access the “free” texts, or must be able to pay for these means. Depending on an individual’s financial resources, the seduction of Kahle’s intellectual utopia may sour as early as the first time a student or scholar attempts to access digital archival materials on their own.

The financial considerations of digital archives are directly linked to logistical concerns. Even if a student has a reliable device on which to view digital archival materials, not all online materials can be downloaded, and some have such large file sizes that they cannot be practicably stored on students’ personal devices, which limits the locations where they can read, and how portable their readings will be. One of my students, for example, lamented the short battery life of her computer and phone, which limited her ability to read outdoors. Attempts at reading digital archival materials on a phone are generally futile in any case because most require extreme zooming on a small screen, if they even load at all. This student and several of her classmates also expressed frustrations about not being able to make notations on a digital text as they might on a printed copy. PDF files of some of the readings were not reliable, which meant that they could be neither annotated digitally nor printed out. The inability to annotate by hand was a common complaint; despite the requirement to bring a computer or tablet to class if possible, many students showed a preference for taking notes on paper. Even those of us who embrace digital technologies ideologically are often more hidebound in practice than we anticipated.

The scanned facsimiles we examined presented many of the problems inherent to digital facsimiles, especially those created by individuals or institutions that do not have codified guidelines in place for digitization. The scans varied widely in quality, sometimes even from page to page. Some had a higher resolution than others, and some were in a flat photocopy-quality black-and-white—perhaps created from 1-bit microfilms—rather than color or grayscale, causing their legibility and indicators of materiality to suffer in some cases. Conversely, there were also drawbacks to the highest-quality scans, especially those

of books that were printed on thin paper. I thought that the bleed-through of text on some pages gave a wonderful sense of a book's materiality, but several students complained that it made them difficult to read. One student said that she "ended up reading a regular text version because the words on the other side of the page would mix with the words on the page I was reading." Another said that he had to increase the brightness of his display and zoom in to read the text. The file size of high-quality scans also required more bandwidth and computing power, which made them slower to load and navigate. Cumbersome interfaces could make such situations even worse: one particularly frustrated student complained (of a specific site) that when he tried to zoom in on a blurry scan with small text, the page would sometimes refresh and take an excessive amount of time to load, causing him to lose his place on the page.

Frustrations with digital archives seemed to compound over the course of the semester. I entered these courses already painfully aware of many of these issues, but I tried to keep my responses to myself until I received feedback from my students. I find it very difficult to endure reading on my computer screen for hours at a time. It is much more difficult for me to fully comprehend texts without being able to mark them up and make notes by hand. I like to read in locations that do not always have a reliable Wi-Fi connection. So, when teaching these classes, I "cheated." I downloaded files. I printed out at least a couple of hundred pages. I read text-only versions of books on my e-reader. I read hardcopies I already owned or borrowed them from the library, then searched for the corresponding page numbers in the digital scans later. In short: I did everything I asked my students to avoid doing if they could help it. Essentially, I created courses that even I could not realistically take according to my own directions. The advantages of digital archives were not great enough to make me determinedly face their drawbacks.

These failures (as I saw them) gave me two options: either I could pretend that I was reading the course materials exactly as I had instructed my students to do, or I could admit to not being able to do so myself. I chose the latter. Once I began to sense my students' frustration with the digital materials in class, I held up the printouts of the readings I had made for myself. I read some of my marginalia aloud to my students when it was relevant to our discussion. I empathized with their frustrations concerning blurry scans, small text sizes, poorly designed interfaces, and connectivity troubles. Our collective failures to adhere to the impossible goal of achieving a truly digital reading list became important teaching moments. Students shared their pleasant experiences with particular digital resources as well as their frustrations. Through experience, rather than through instruction, my students and I learned how digital archives work—or fail to work—and how to most effectively navigate them.

In the end, these classes became exercises in exploring both the opportunities and the limitations of digital archives, rather than simply focusing on literature and composition. I have generally been able to convince my students of the value of using such archives, despite the difficulties we encountered. My favorite student assessment of our experiments with digital archives reads, "I prefer reading books printed instead of online and going through this class has just reaffirmed my preference." The phrase "going through" underscores the fact that extensively using digital archives is a process—one that may be rewarding in important respects but one that is not always pleasant. Regardless of how each student felt at the end of the semester, the general attitude in each class was one of camaraderie, of solidarity in the face of a grueling ordeal. As we coaxed our inner Luddites to accept change, we were acutely

aware that misery loves company. At least we were all “going through” this *together*.

Conclusion: A Common Goal

Using digital archives for any significant amount of research or pedagogy involves many challenges, a good number of which are difficult to surmount given the technologies that are currently available to most consumers in developed countries—in the case of my pedagogy, undergraduate students at a large American state university—let alone those in developing nations. Still, such archives offer valuable access to materials that are difficult, or often impossible, for scholars and students to examine in another format. I have taught one course that simply would not have been possible without the use of digital archives, and another whose effectiveness would have been severely diminished without them. Many of my major research projects would also have been impossible to pursue without these archives. The considerable physical and mental strain on myself and my students has been worth grappling with because working with digital archives—individually and together—has sparked insights and discussions that would not have emerged in similar classes that are taught with newer, printed editions of literary texts.

Despite their significant drawbacks and limitations, I contend that using digital archives contributes significantly to students’ and scholars’ understanding not only of the texts they are examining, but of how archives and archival materials are used, organized, and made accessible. There is still much work to be done to increase the ease and efficiency with which these materials can be used, however. Those who teach with and study digital archival materials must develop strategies for mitigating the negative effects of reading long texts online, especially in the case of novels and other lengthy texts. Scholars and instructors should also take time to familiarize themselves and their students with the full capabilities of the sites through which they access digital materials. Individually and as part of a larger scholarly community, we must find new ways to navigate and make use of digital archival materials and foster an environment of “togetherness with the past” that is vital to effective scholarship and pedagogy.

Endnotes

- 1 In this article, I use a broad definition of the word “archive” that includes a range of physical and digital repositories of unpublished or rare materials that are difficult to access in their original forms.
- 2 Clearly distinguishing between “original” and “facsimile” is fraught, but for the purposes of this article, I use “digital facsimile” to refer to digital scans—generally available on the Internet—of physical books and periodicals.
- 3 “Pre-original” is generally used in discussions of nineteenth-century French serialized literature, but as the systems of serialized publication in Britain were similar to those in France, I feel the term is appropriate here.
- 4 I’ve used digital archives in other courses, but have not relied as heavily on them as I did in these two courses.
- 5 High-quality scans of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Kidnapped* as published in *Young Folks Paper* are hosted by the University Libraries Digital Collections at the University of South Carolina: <http://library.sc.edu/digital/collections/rlsk.html>.
- 6 The all-ages adventure novel *Kidnapped* was serialized in *Young Folks Paper*: a weekly newspaper targeted at children.
- 7 *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1891-2) was serialized in in the general-interest monthly magazine *The Strand Magazine*.
- 8 *Heart of Darkness* was serialized monthly as “The Heart of Darkness” in three installments in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, a journal that features literary fiction, criticism, political pieces, and similarly “serious” content.
- 9 *The War of the Worlds*, a “scientific romance,” was serialized monthly in *Pearson’s Magazine*, which generally focuses on fiction and articles related to science, politics, and history. H. G. Wells used the term “scientific romance” for his early novels “evolving from the romantic tradition but incorporating some scientific breakthrough that is crucial to the central conflict.” He later referred to them as “scientific fantasies.” See Thomas Renzi, *H. G. Wells: Six Scientific Romances Adapted for Film*, Second Edition (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), xx.
- 10 This version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published in a single issue of *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine*: a monthly literary magazine. The novel was heavily revised and expanded into the 1891 version that is most widely read today.
- 11 *The Yellow Book* (1894-7) is an avant-garde literary and visual arts journal.
- 12 My institution currently employs Canvas LMS (Learning Management System) as our online learning platform. Canvas’s features include online discussion boards, a system for submitting and receiving feedback on assignments, grade and attendance trackers, among other capabilities.
- 13 Accounting for a few rare instances of two students choosing the same text to discuss in their response posts.
- 14 Woolf Online is a “digital archive of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*” funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities and maintained by a group of Woolf scholars. It is

currently found at <http://www.woolfonline.com>.

- 15 There are also significant ethical and political concerns bound up with archives (both physical and digital), especially in the case of materials created by and/or related to colonized peoples and other marginalized groups. No archive is apolitical, and control of archives represents a kind of power by the archivist over the archived. See, e.g., works by Kimberly Christen on digital archival materials by indigenous peoples, including “Does Information Really Want to be Free? Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the Question of Openness,” *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 2870-2893. As my courses centered on European texts in the public domain, we did not devote a great deal of time to these discussions, but I did challenge my students to consider the problematic nature of canon-building and the assumptions we make about the quality and value of literary texts in the Western academy.
- 16 See John S. North in the introduction to this article.

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Madeline Gangnes is a PhD candidate in English at the University of Florida and a graduate of the University of Dundee's MLitt in Comics Studies program. Her research focuses on the relationship between imagetext works and other media. Her dissertation examines the use of digital archives to access serialized Victorian fiction and the paratextual materials printed alongside canonical texts in periodicals. She also conducts research related to digital humanities, climate fiction, and film and media studies. Madeline is currently the editorial assistant for *Studies in Comics*, the president of the University of Florida's Graduate Comics Organization, the associate editor of *Sequentials*, and a member of UF's Trace Innovation Initiative and UF's Science Fiction Working Group. Contact: mbgangnes@ufl.edu.