Transatlantic Studies in Digital Space

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Teaching in a digital space simply means that the classroom is bigger. This was the main idea underlying the structure of my Transatlantic Studies course, which I designed and offered to GESA majors and other HSU students for the first time in spring semester 2021. I laid out the scope of Transatlantic Studies in the opening paragraph of an article published in the 2020 issue of the *California Geographer*:

Spanning 41 million square miles of the earth’s surface and connecting four continents, the Atlantic Ocean houses the origins of our current global culture. Within its depths lie legacies of nightmarish atrocities, traces of great human ambitions, and echoes of enlightened ideas. Traverses back and forth across this giant pool, the epicenter of the so-called “Age of Exploration,” resulted in unprecedented exchanges of humans, ideas and ideologies, goods and gods, technologies and diseases. The manifold consequences of these Transatlantic interactions reverberate with us today. As evidence, one need look no further than the Black Lives Matter movement, reminding us that the current economies in the Americas are founded on the labor of enslaved Africans. Financial interlinkages across the Atlantic, founded and strengthened through waves of European colonization and imperialism, continue to structure the global economy to uphold the dominance of Western Europe and North America over Africa, the Caribbean, and Middle and South America. New and hybrid cultural forms, from food to fashion and music, arose from Transatlantic interactions, subsequently becoming global culture. In short, study of the Transatlantic as a historic geographic region can lead to critical insight into complex social and cultural dynamics that we grapple with today.

The terms “watch it, read it, discuss it, and write it” represent the basic principles of the classes. Developing my skills with video editing software, I designed lectures using formats popularized by video essayists. These videos were then paired with a scholarly article, together forming the content to be ingested prior to class and acting as an entrance ticket for the discussions. Class discussions became the scenes of lively conversations dedicated to the material and allowed space for students to converse despite the limitations of the virtual campus. The cycle for each unit ended with students writing in a discussion forum, critically reflecting on the lecture, reading material, and class discussion. By design, the expert was positioned to be a facilitator. The results of this structure were enlightening. Students became responsible for managing their learning time and could watch the lectures at their convenience. The distance from campus, and the virtual nature of all courses this past academic year, compelled students to be responsible for taking control of the class and their individual experience.
Each assignment was designed to allow students to apply the learned material. For instance, using an “untest” model, students designed their own midterm with the materials presented as their only tool. Each student created a unique test, displaying not only their mastery of the material, but also articulating their biggest takeaway from the course up to that point. The “untest” midterm allowed me to decide the direction of the course for the second half of the semester. I applied the same methodology in the associate depth course with an “un-essay” based on primary sources. Furthermore, in the depth section, I asked students to familiarize themselves with the dataset management side of digital cartography, imparting the idea that without clean data your maps fall apart.

The digital classroom allowed for the inclusion of other outside experts. On three occasions, I brought guests positioned to guide deeper discussion of course material. My interviews with two of the guests were recorded, which students watched in lieu of a lecture. In these instances, discussion days became live Q&A forums with experts.

Innovations made to Transatlantic Studies over the semester were necessitated by the online campus, prompting the question: Is Transatlantic Studies a digital humanities course? Sure, this course falls within the digital humanities realm, but not because of innovations occurring throughout this semester. Transatlantic Studies, from the beginning, was designed with “watch it, read it, discuss it, and write it” in mind. As such, Transatlantic Studies is not just a look back at history or an evaluation of contemporary cultural and socio-political geographies. It looks to the future, helping equip students with tools to navigate forthcoming changes in the digital age. In terms of utility, the digital tools and course content were equals in the successful development and delivery of Transatlantic Studies.