Digital Media Projects in the Dostoevsky Classroom

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What benefit can digital media projects bring to the Dostoevsky classroom? In the past decade advances in media and technology have transformed the reading experience and the ways readers relate to texts. Students’ daily reading material is primarily digital: social media, online news media, and, in the case of the literary text, the ebook. Dostoevsky’s novels are particularly challenging for students who are more used to reading short bursts of text. Indeed, Robin Feuer Miller calls Crime and Punishment in the classroom “the elephant in the garden” precisely because we teach this “large, unwieldy, and difficult novel” to students who may not usually read literary texts (47). Although Dostoevsky’s nineteenth-century texts seem removed from the digital world, digital technologies also make new ways of approaching the text of Crime and Punishment and Dostoevsky’s historical context possible. Digital media projects can be a powerful classroom tool, both for engaging with the text and for helping students develop technology skills in addition to the classic learning outcomes of the literature class: critical thinking and academic writing.

This essay will give an overview of several different projects grounded in digital media approaches or digital humanities methodologies that work well in the Dostoevsky classroom: a collaborative digital research project, a digital mapping project, and digital text analysis. I will outline the benefits of each type of project, the nuts and bolts of constructing these kinds of assignments, helpful resources, and new ways of looking at the novel revealed through digital media approaches. Finally, I will conclude with a section on best practices that will address assessment of these projects as well as the level of support students will need as they engage in them. As we all know, technology changes rapidly. In five years some of my specific recommendations may no longer be functional or feasible, but the description of best practices and of the benefits related to bringing these kinds of projects into the classroom will hopefully remain a helpful resource. The examples I give here are specific to Crime and Punishment, but the methods could be applied to any literary work that the particular digital project will suit.
Digital Research: Dostoevsky’s Life and Context

Crime and Punishment invariably prompts student questions about history and context. Russia in the 1860s is far removed from student experience, and the minutiae of daily life described in the text fascinate, from the significance of Sonya’s yellow ticket and how her occupation as a prostitute might impact her family’s social status to what student life was like in mid-nineteenth-century Russia, from the meaning of the Lazarus text to what Svidrigailov means when he says he is “going to America” just before committing suicide. Students are also curious about Dostoevsky’s life in the context of the novel: his student days in St. Petersburg, involvement in the Petrashevsky circle, mock execution and imprisonment in Siberia, and religious awakening. Giving students the opportunity to do a collaborative research project can be a motivating way of harnessing their natural curiosity and using it both to explore other facets of the novel and to meet learning outcomes for the course.

In a collaborative digital research project, each individual or pair of students has an assigned topic to research; students then compile their individual research articles into a collective resource. Some examples of these projects include online exhibits, wikis (see “Wiki”), or electronic anthologies. For an online exhibit, each student is assigned an object to caption; the final product is a collective overview of a topic intended to engage public interest. For a wiki project—either a wiki compiled by the class or a Wikipedia editing assignment1—students each choose a topic and write a short research-led article with a presumed audience of classmates or members of the public. An electronic anthology in which each student writes a brief research note about an extract, theme, or character from Crime and Punishment could be assembled and distributed within the class as a PDF or could take the form of a class blog or website.

Each project requires students to conduct original research, to produce a text to a specific standard, and to consider the purpose of their writing and their audience. Writing an exhibition caption, for example, is different from writing a wiki entry, although both forms require similar research skills. Creating a public-facing project like this can additionally be empowering for student researchers. Rather than writing a paper that will be read only by their instructor or by a small group of peers, a digital collaborative research project creates a sense of collective purpose and also excitement about and pride in the finished product. In 2016 my Dostoevsky students created a library exhibit celebrating 150 years since the publication of Crime and Punishment
(Crime and Punishment at 150). Afterward several students commented that the experience of researching the exhibit captions made them feel like “detectives” and requested that future students have a similar opportunity. In order to create the experience for future classes, I created what I have termed the Dosto-wiki (“Course: RUSS412/Dostowiki”), a wiki comprised of student research articles that grows every year I teach my Dostoevsky class and serves as a perpetual first-stop research resource for my students.

**Digital Mapping: The Petersburg Text**

*Crime and Punishment* is closely engaged with its setting. Many students, however, are not familiar with St. Petersburg’s geography or prepared to imagine the novel’s locations in the city. A digital mapping project is a wonderful tool for enabling a deeper engagement with spatiality, geography, and narrative, particularly in understanding Dostoevsky’s Petersburg, and can open new avenues to interpretation. My first experience with mapping in the classroom was an assignment in which students drew their own maps of St. Petersburg and plotted a certain number of points from Dostoevsky’s novel on it. This kind of assignment is useful, but with the sheer amount of information available online, students can easily find the points in a matter of seconds. However, updating the assignment to incorporate a research component allows it to function as a rigorous tool in unlocking the text’s layers of meaning.

I assign my students two different digital mapping projects to help them visualize Dostoevsky’s St. Petersburg; one involves finding and plotting points of interest and the second plots movement across a map. In both cases, I ask students to submit an annotated map and a research document—a short analytical text that uses the map as the basis for making an interpretive claim about the text. The research document helps align the projects more closely with the research-focused learning objectives of my class. While both projects could be done on paper, incorporating digital mapping tools such as Google Maps speeds the mapmaking process and gives students more time to focus on the critical analysis of the connections between the literary text and the space of the city, for example the novel’s locations (Raskolnikov’s room, Sonya’s room, the pawnbroker’s apartment, the Haymarket Square, etc.) and their distance from or proximity to the ceremonial spaces of the city.

Requiring that students demonstrate movement in the mapping project opens up further possibilities for analysis. They might, for example, map Raskolnikov’s murder route or chart and
juxtapose his wanderings with those of Svidrigaylov. Sarah J. Young’s and John Levins’s excellent website *Mapping St Petersburg: Experiments in Literary Cartography* shows examples of digital maps showing movement, created with *Google Maps*. There are several other digital tools well suited to this kind of project, however. The presentation application *Prezi*, for example, can be useful in building narrative maps and presenting them to the class. In my class, students use *StoryMapJS* to create narrative maps. *StoryMapJS* was specifically designed to connect narrative and space in journalism. The site uses the *Google Maps* database but also allows users to upload any image.

After constructing their narrative maps, my students write a brief analytical text that addresses the way spatiality functions in the literary text. I assign this kind of analysis because it enables students to see the text in a new way and leads to a final research paper topic that engages with questions of space and the novel. Plotting the important locations of the story on the map, and conducting visual and historical research into these locales, helps students better understand the geography of St. Petersburg and the way the spatiality of *Crime and Punishment* significantly informs its subject.

**Digital Text Analysis: Visualizing Narrative**

Digital humanities (DH) is a field that specifically employs digital tools to conduct humanistic research and analysis. The digital narrative mapping project as described above is one DH approach to literary text analysis. In this section, I will speak more generally about incorporating DH text analysis methodologies into assignments. As literature scholars, one methodology upon which we often rely is close reading. Digital text analysis is an extension of close reading and can be particularly useful in helping students visualize the way narrative functions in the text and thus come to see the literary text in a new light. There are several different ways to facilitate digital text analysis in the classroom. One method is to break the text down at the level of narrative using digital media, such as a social media platform (like *Twitter* or *LiveJournal*). Another method is to use a digital tool to parse and visualize the words of the text.

Digital media platforms offer opportunities for students to pull the text apart at its seams and reconstruct it through their own analysis. Digital media projects might include creating a *Twitter* feed from one character’s perspective (see, for example, Bowers, “@RodionTweets”) or using other interactive media, such as *LiveJournal* or *Facebook*, to re-create segments of the
novel. This type of assignment is popular with students but also requires a deep analytical reading and thinking at a narrative level that fosters a deeper understanding of Dostoevsky’s craft.\(^6\) Using digital tools such as *Voyant Tools* to break down narrative is also a possibility and does not require coding knowledge. *Voyant* is a suite of text visualization tools to which users can upload digital texts, like the public domain translation of *Crime and Punishment* from Project Gutenberg, by entering a web address or uploading a file. Applying specific tools to the raw text generates a series of visualizations of word frequency and position within the novel. Manipulating variables allows users to determine, for example, the frequency with which particular characters or particular words (like “crime” and “repent”) appear in various parts of the novel. These results then prompt other questions.\(^7\) For example, the name “Raskolnikov” appears most frequently in every part of the novel except book 5, when “Sonya” is mentioned more often than any other character. Students might ask what Sonya’s role is in book 5 in particular, or what kinds of narrative tension her prominence in book 5 and lesser status in other parts of the novel create.

Digital approaches to text analysis can yield powerful results, but incorporating them into the classroom can be more confusing than valuable for students unless projects are integrated into the class’s learning objectives. Just doing digital text analysis is not an end in itself. However, as a methodology used to explore larger narrative questions, digital humanities text analysis can encourage deeper analysis and interpretation of the novel. In encouraging students to use this kind of analysis or in assigning projects, it is useful to always keep the larger goal of the project in mind. Deborah A. Martinsen suggests organizing classroom discussion of *Crime and Punishment* around four big questions: “1) How do we read the novel?; 2) Do we want Raskolnikov to get away?; 3) Do we forget Lizaveta, and why does this matter?; and 4) Is the epilogue organic or tacked on?” (162). Keeping questions like this, which digital humanities methodologies can help answer, central to project assignments will keep digital text analysis closely aligned with class learning outcomes.

**Best Practices: Tech Support, Student Privacy Concerns, and Assessment**

While there are many benefits to assigning digital media projects, instructors should think through questions of tech support, student privacy, and assessment well in advance of including these assignments on a syllabus. In addition to the information on best practices below, I...
recommend that everyone assigning digital media projects explore the literature of teaching and learning and digital humanities pedagogy, which includes excellent resources for instructors.\(^8\)

The first consideration in planning digital assignments is tech support. I recommend seeking out your institution’s digital humanities center, learning technology center, or digital resource librarian to find out what kind of support is available on your campus for the kind of project you want to do. Include details about available support in the assignment overview your students receive. You should also plan to complete a sample project yourself before assigning a similar one; this exercise will help you anticipate the issues that will arise for your students. Always remember that, even if your students are digital natives, this does not mean that they understand how all technologies function; having to learn a new application or tech skill for a class project can be stressful. Be sure that students have ample time and the support resources they need, whether that is a link to instructions on wiki coding, a YouTube video about how to use StoryMapJS, or an in-class tutorial in Voyant Tools.

The second concern is one of student privacy. Many of the projects I have outlined above are public facing, and it is important to consider students’ privacy in creating them. How will students be credited for their public-facing work, and is an anonymous option possible? Who can see students’ work? I have found it helpful to touch base with the teaching and learning center at my university about student privacy concerns and how best to address them; I recommend that anyone embarking on public-facing student digital projects do the same. Also, considering that contemporary social media can be dangerous and toxic, if you plan to use social media in the classroom, it is important to consider student safety and provide alternative assignment structures for students who are uncomfortable or feel vulnerable on social media. In terms of privacy, the watchwords for instructors assigning digital media projects should be flexibility and vigilance: the flexibility to adapt as students require and vigilance for student safety.

The final question is how to assess digital media projects. The broader issue here is how the digital media project aligns with the learning objectives of the course. In weighting these projects, I keep in mind the specific tasks involved and the amount of time I expect they will take. In my Dostoevsky class I use the collaborative digital research project in lieu of a midterm paper. Although students are not writing many words, going to the library and conducting research, refining the text so that it is clean and the tone is appropriate for the audience, and learning how to use a new application take considerable time. When creating an assignment
rubric, I consider what I want students to focus on in the project. In my rubric, for example, the research component and the analysis receive stronger weight than the visual aspects of the project, but students also receive points for exceptional creativity or design elements.

Digital media projects allow students to interact with Dostoevsky and *Crime and Punishment* beyond typical essay or exam assignments. They empower students to think outside the box when conducting research and to pursue creative approaches to the text. Conducting research without having to worry about the intimidating task of making an original argument about Dostoevsky helps students acclimate to good research practice, a useful precursor to a research paper assignment. These projects also enable a discussion about research best practice to occur organically. For most students conducting research, the Internet is the first destination; digital media projects prompt class conversations about the importance of reliable, scholarly sources, issues of copyright and plagiarism, and how to responsibly use Internet resources like *Wikipedia* in conducting research. In my experience, though, the best benefit is that digital media projects create a vibrant research culture in the classroom and give students ownership over their role as burgeoning literary scholars and researchers.

NOTES

1. If your university does not have its own wiki platform, a free wiki can be created on a site like Wiki.com. *Wikipedia* offers helpful guidelines for educators that should be consulted as you plan editing assignments to avoid common pitfalls (“Wikipedia: Student Assignments”).

2. Young’s and Levins’s site includes a number of maps addressing narrative questions in *Crime and Punishment* (see “Mapping Dostoevsky”).

3. See Stilwell for an example of a *Prezi* map of *Crime and Punishment* characters. The presentation could be adapted for narrative mapping with the addition of a background image that includes a map of St. Petersburg.

4. An example of a *StoryMapJS* map of *Crime and Punishment* locations submitted by my student, Olga Kim, and shared with permission, can be found at https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/609619096e98e9b0458fdf4280d3e6c3/raskolnikovs-map-1/index.html.

5. On the possibility inherent in these kinds of research questions, see Levin and Young.

6. See Kate Holland’s chapter in the present volume or my blog post “Twitterature” in the
Dostoevsky Classroom.”

7. I have written a colloquial guide to doing text analysis with *Voyant Tools* that may be helpful if you have never used this tool before. See Bowers, “DSC #6: Voyant’s Big Day.”

8. A good starting point is the MLA Commons resource *Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities*, which is a curated site of open access tools, artifacts, and texts (digitalpedagogy.hcommons.org/).