(Re)Orienting TEL in the classroom: Notes on an evolving project
Kevin Smith

Introduction

This semester I’ve been interested in the use of XML markup as an approach to composition. Up until now, I would like to credit Trey Converse’s piece, “Changing Medium, Transforming Composition,” for an invaluable teaching project. I will talk a lot more about Converse and his approach towards the end of this post. As I’ve had this idea in the back of my head throughout the past few semesters, I’ve been including XML in my writing and the use of XML in my class. First, the extent to which this experience is grounded in my personal and professional experience is not a question of whether or not the teaching material can make explicit some implicit features of academic discourse (but also how a mixing focus may elude certain theoretical discussions/considerations). Sometimes this discussion is (problematically) called back vs. (and) vs. in a binary that is more useful than a possible interpretation in terms of social processes and power and the level of detail of our analysis. The most recent issue of the Journal of Digital Humanities includes Sarah Oates’s “Newcastle University” retrieved from the history of the original code. Second, and perhaps more pragmatic, I’ve been thinking about ways to approach the introduction of DH methods to first-year undergraduates in a composition course. Is this even appropriate?

Body

As I’ve established, I am interested in the idea of helping students encode their own writing in TEL. The main benefits I see of this is to make explicit the often implicit conventions of academic discourse. As Trey Converse argues

> Requesting students to compose and tag their writing within an XML editor ensured that they explicitly and deliberately identified their own rhetorical and compositional choices.

I agree, but wonder how the critical interventions made by scholars like McKenzie, Koh, Bailey, and Cecere need to inform this practice.

Functionally, my approach to this is informed by Trevor Owens’s discussion of design-based research, which then is the idea of integrating teaching and learning by building teachers’ knowledge. For example, Owens contents that all design have “implies and explicit arguments inside them,” that “the core element of the solution to the problem is knowledge” is to write these arguments down. Owen’s is arguing for a change in the way we understand the documentation of design and does not necessarily require a certain level of detail or explicitness. I understand this as a helpful methodology for the sake of the course. Theorization can be made explicit (indeed, be required and valued) relatively easily in the space of the classroom.

How will students have time to meaningfully engage these methods while also taking the time to critically examine them? To answer this question, I will discuss two primary methods to my approach: first, conceiving markup as a kind of direct visualization; second, context-sourcing (sort of a customized TEL model).

I was struck with Leo Manovich’s description of “direct visualization,” especially after hearing about the “generous interfaces” of Mitchell Whitmore from Katherine Boyle’s talk at Northeastern titled “Digital Humanities & Digital Newspapers: The Australian Story” (you can see the slides and the transcript here). Now I’m sure that these of these terminologies I prefer. I also have a long-standing personal and professional fascination with the ideas of Manovich and others who have written about digital visualization. This is a topic that I am often asked about, and a topic that I am especially interested in discussing further.

When compared with generous interfaces, this description (without sampling) seems to be a difference in kind, rather than a difference in degree. This is where I begin to think about using this terminology in my own project. Despite the fact that we would not be spatially representing anything, would be possible to present this project in terms of mapping? Or is a form of visualization that can be deployed by students thinking productively about what is making affordances? It seems to me that this approach could be helpful in reshaping student interest. The key aspect I want to get at here is something Bethany Newhall directs as being talked about when using Newhall.

Notation uses somatics visualization not as a result but as a process; as an interpretive act that will itself — immediately — be changed by the further and unique ways of motion. Ensuring that very algorithmic data visualization process is not fundamentally different from feeling, as is a productive resistance to the materiality of digital data visualization. In some of Newhall’s content, they are prompted to formulate their arguments by showing them.

The act of drawing is productive in a way that abstract thinking about drawing cannot. Already in composition classes, I ask students to create abstract models of writing. This primarily takes two forms first, reverse outlining their own papers to prepare for revision; second, generating abstract outlines of examples of writing (students and otherwise) to see as models for their own writing. I use these methods because they work. These activities help students get organized their writing. But they also help students understand how to speak back to texts. Understanding the underlying structure can help them get at how an argument is functioning and help them critique that argument. My argument with using TEL/XML is that we could formalize these abstracted methods as an explicit part of the composition class. One idea of helping with visualization, I want to make the markup visible in the final product. This I (hope) can be accomplished through XSLT (though this is an area I need to familiarize myself with).

Even if my conception of mapping/visualization of texts is problematic, there is also a pragmatist ethos to Newhall’s assertion that is very seductive to me. And note that I think applies to textual encoding as a scholarly activity just as it applies to mapping.

Part of what the discussion above (regarding back/next) was meant to work through is the common ground in the “making” methodology. What is it that these disparate methods of DH have in common? To make TEL markup the principal form in which students compose texts, there will be moments that are difficult. One can imagine having whole classes dedicated to deconstructing the deployment of another tag. The interpretive process of TEL is certainly one of the primary features that makes it a productive tool for scholarship. Eventually, though, the students will have to choose one option and roll it with it to determine what they want to complete their composition. They can’t simply endlessly compare the relative benefits and drawbacks of a particular tag and then decide. They need to make the (often tacit) common sense that I want to be productive in a composition classroom. All of which relates to the “productive unness” that Flanders argues, arises out of our creation of digital models of physical artifacts, “productive not of forward motion but of that oscillating, dejected pluralism that is the scholarly mind at work.” While my students will not be creating digital models of physical objects, I think the key for Flanders still applies.

it is the art of stating rules that requires the discipline of methodological self-referencing... [A] new tool for manipulating digital models enables, the model shows markup and lacks on a deeper role as an interpretative representation, one which deliberately limits and exaggeratesdiscarded so that we can work with the parts that matter to us.

This methodological self-referencing is the same thing I ask of my students when I ask them to create abstract models of writing: let’s make the rules abstract. Together, let’s make the complex and structured writing we do resist abstract modeling. What can we learn from this feeling of tension? This feeling is produced through drawing on a map, or creating a digital scholarly edition, or deciding one tag or another in a markup scheme. This last area, the markup scheme, is the final consideration I’d like to outline with respect to my planned approach.

I plan to have the class collectively create (IEL call broad-sourcing or student-sourcing) a schema for marking up texts. Converse describes personally creating a “markup scheme in line with [his] most urgent goals” for each of the four assignment in his XML-based composition course. This schema must be logical (something I sometimes worry about). But another part of me sees this as unnecessarily prescriptive. To the fair, I think Converse convincingly justifies this choice.

Rhetorically-oriented markup schemes make assignment goals explicit in a way that traditional prompts simply cannot. They provide consistent opportunities during the writing process to reflect critically on whether the composition is successfully working toward the assigned goal.

So again we are talking about implicit vs. explicit expectations. I sense a theme here. Converse’s approach puts the onus on the instructor to articulate what is expected of students. This is not to say that the teacher is not partly responsible for the expectations that students make, but rather that the teachers are allowed to articulate preserves a level of control that is problematic. Being that I am less interested in the constraints that are placed on students, I feel that this approach allows more freedom for students to explore their own ideas.

In our classroom, we use a class to collaboratively discuss and compile the metrics by which their assignments will be assessed. The results of these approach have been mixed (to say the least), but I am not prepared to abandon it. At its best it serves to create a more flexible and descriptive understanding of what is expected of writing in myriad contexts. How do disciplines and audiences construct conventions? How does the structure of the classroom influence the role of expectations? These are old questions in new packaging, but important questions nonetheless.

In this particular case, I want the students to source the creation of grading criteria in the past, I think a student-sourced markup schema would allow more flexibility and conversation around the structure of XML. Writing conventions create a framework for thinking about the course overall and discover the end product. The course overall and the end products have a very particular shape of relationship, and the course overall. The purpose of the future projects.

Conclusion

Finally, I want to address the most pragmatic questions of what are my next steps? It’s time to start working on this project.

Ultimately, I suspect there may be a happy medium between Converse’s approach and what I envision. I plan to customize a TEL schema that I feel can serve as a foundation for ours. This will both constrain the TEL—removing elements, attributes, and definitions that are extraneous to our project—and expand it—adding elements, attributes, and definitions—based on what I think students will need to not include in XML. I’m lucky to know several people working on the (amazing) Early Caribbean Digital Archive. My plan is modeled off of my understanding of how the ECDL customized their TEL schema (thanks, Sarah Stanfield). The first major step is the creation of a new schema (which will generate the schema). I’ll attempt this by marking up a sample of the digital resource. This will be the starting point for identifying the potential elements, attributes, and definitions. This will (hopefully) lead to identifying the necessary, unnecessary, under-defined, and non-existent elements, attributes, and definitions. Validation errors will serve, as described, as “notes to self” about what needs to be customized for my purposes. This will be the basis for the ODL file and the standard schema.

So after a lot of talk of how I got here, that’s where I’m going (hopefully).