

Project Name

Digital Thoreau: Crowdsourcing Commentary

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Campus Geneseo, State University College at

Year of Project 2012

Tier Tier Two

Project Team

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Overview Summary

Creation of a platform for collaborative textual annotation, enabling individuals across multiple courses, campuses, levels of expertise, and intellectual approaches to engage in rich, vibrant, multi-layered conversation around a single text.

Outcomes Summary

The [project website](#) describes the process, and the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) provides a very good overview

Project Abstract

This project grows out of SUNY Geneseo's involvement in Digital Thoreau, a collaboration with the Thoreau Society and the Thoreau Institute Library at Walden Woods to promote engagement with the texts of Henry David Thoreau, beginning with Walden.

Digital Thoreau has both scholarly and pedagogical components. The heart of the scholarly component is a digital genetic text of Walden, showing the growth and development of Thoreau's manuscript through seven

successive versions, and providing textual annotations developed by the late Thoreau scholar (and SUNY Distinguished Professor) Walter Harding. The heart of the pedagogical component is an interactive interface for the text of Walden that will permit users to add their own comments to Thoreau's text.

Open-source software exists to create such an interface. For example, both CommentPress (<http://www.futureofthebook.org/commentpress/>) and Digress.it (<http://digress.it>) work with the popular blogging platform WordPress to enable users to leave paragraph-by-paragraph comments on any text. Using Digress.it, the New York Public Library has created, in *Candide* 2.0 (<http://candide.nypl.org/text/>), what it calls a "networked text" of Voltaire's classic as an "experiment in public reading and communal annotation."

Our project aims to provide a similar interface for Thoreau's Walden, but to do so in a way that provides a richer, more complex, more layered user experience than is provided by *Candide* 2.0 or any other interactive text we know of. The experience we envision has the potential to significantly advance student learning and engagement across disciplines at SUNY and beyond.

Whereas the interactive texts we have seen allow users to create only an undifferentiated collection of comments about a particular section of text, our project would allow comments to be categorized, sorted, and filtered along a variety of dimensions, so that, depending on user preference, the comments displayed for a given section of text might be only those related to the geology or biology of Walden Pond, or only those from students in an American literature course at the University at Buffalo, or only those from Thoreau scholars recognized by an editorial board. They might also be comments from students at two different campuses, enrolled in two different courses where Walden is being read, whose instructors have decided to put their students into conversation with each other around Thoreau's text.

Such an interface might also include a system whereby the most interesting or illuminating comments would be promoted upward by the user community, so that these would be visible in a layer that cuts across all the other categories.

The resulting pedagogical tool would achieve some of the same purposes, at a greatly expanded level, and with far more flexibility, than, for example, the Looking for Whitman annotations project (<http://lookingforwhitman.org/projects/whitman-annotations/>), which put four different college campuses to work commenting on four different Whitman texts.

The approach taken here could be replicated across multiple texts, any one of which could become the basis of collaborative annotation across multiple courses, campuses, and levels of expertise, or disciplinary approaches. The resulting conversation would bring together students, faculty, and other participants in a vibrant community of engaged readers. The cross-course, cross-campus, cross-disciplinary threads of this conversation would simultaneously leverage and enhance the "systemness" of SUNY by crossing the boundaries traditionally imposed on discussion by the limitations of the single classroom.

Moreover, in any given class participating in this vibrant community of textual commentators, students would develop a much stronger sense of the inherently communal nature of critical analysis than the conventional classroom setting - and the conventional writing assignment (e.g., the five-page essay with an audience of one: the professor) - affords. Thus, the project takes a novel approach to developing a crucial skill of liberal learning: the ability to read closely, think critically, and "enter the conversation" about an important cultural object in a way that requires ideas to be supported by evidence.

These benefits would all result from the project's taking an existing idea - an interface for interactive reading - and making the idea scalable. It is the absence, for now, of any means whereby readers might locate the conversational threads uniquely relevant to them (as individuals or, perhaps, as students in a course) that seems to doom any large-scale effort at communal commentary to become an unnavigable morass of talk.

That is why the greatest part of the effort in this project must go into either modifying existing, opensource

code (for Digress.it or CommentPress) or writing new code to achieve the scalability envisioned. Any new code produced would be available to the larger programming community, at SUNY and beyond, under a Creative Commons, share-alike license, so that the project could be replicated easily.

The coding effort in this project is envisioned as having its own crowdsourcing element, in the form of a small-scale, regional conference that Geneseo would hold for the development and sharing of ideas for the implementation and use of crowdsourced textual commentary. The conference (or, technically, unconference) would be proposed as part of the highly successful series known as THATCamp (The Humanities and Technology Camp): see <http://thatcamp.org>

Reports and Resources

- [Project website](#)
- [Project outcomes report](#)
- [Project outcomes update](#)
- [Article in The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)
- [Article in Democrat & Chronicle](#)
- [Article in USA Today](#)

Connected Learning Methods

- Collaborative Learning Technologies
- Virtual Learning Communities

Instructional Design

- Online Education