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Engaging Appalachia: Digital Literacies, Mobile Media, And A Sense Of Place

By: Mark Nunes

Abstract

Objectives: To provide students with an opportunity to explore the intersection of digital and civic engagement through project-based learning; to develop digital literacy skills through critical media practices.

Rationale: While it has become a commonplace of sorts to assume that students who have grown up in a period of widespread access to web-based resources and mobile devices will have well-developed digital literacy skills, a growing body of knowledge would seem to suggest that so-called “digital natives” are by no means generationally united in their ability to critically engage in new media practices (Selwyn, 2009; Davies, Halford, & Gibbins, 2012). To compound matters, our classroom practices often tend to stress the importance of critical thinking as it applies to reading the media, with less emphasis on producing media objects. But as Jenkins (2006) notes, “Just as we would not traditionally assume that someone is literate if they can read but not write, we should not assume that someone possesses media literacy if they can consume but not express themselves” (p. 170). Project-based learning provides an opportunity for students to produce media objects as a means of reflecting upon theoretical concepts. As Thomas (2000) notes, in project-based learning, “projects are central, not peripheral to the curriculum” (p. 3); in addition, the projects should enable students to explore critical course learning outcomes through an application of these concepts to “authentic (not simulated) problems or questions” (p. 4). Lee, Blackwell, Drake, & Moran (2014) note that while project-based learning has become fairly well-established in K-12 reform, higher education has been slower in adopting project-based methodologies, even though an emphasis on experiential learning, and a liberal education model informed by the related, Deweyian concept of problem-based learning, are by no means novel concepts on college campuses . . . This activity, and all of the other projects in this course, required students to critically engage in the region in which they found themselves going to school – Southern Appalachia.

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Engaging Appalachia: Digital Literacies, Mobile Media, and a Sense of Place

Mark Nunes

Courses: *Media & Society, Social Media Strategies, Intro to New Media*

Objectives: *To provide students with an opportunity to explore the intersection of digital and civic engagement through project-based learning; to develop digital literacy skills through critical media practices.*

Rationale:

While it has become a commonplace of sorts to assume that students who have grown up in a period of widespread access to web-based resources and mobile devices will have well-developed digital literacy skills, a growing body of knowledge would seem to suggest that so-called “digital natives” are by no means generationally united in their ability to critically engage in new media practices (Selwyn, 2009; Davies, Halford, & Gibbins, 2012). To compound matters, our classroom practices often tend to stress the importance of critical thinking as it applies to reading the media, with less emphasis on producing media objects. But as Jenkins (2006) notes, “Just as we would not traditionally assume that someone is literate if they can read but not write, we should not assume that someone possesses media literacy if they can consume but not express themselves” (p. 170).

Project-based learning provides an opportunity for students to produce media objects as a means of reflecting upon theoretical concepts. As Thomas (2000) notes, in project-based learning, “projects are central, not peripheral to the curriculum” (p. 3); in addition, the projects should enable students to explore critical course learning outcomes through an application of these concepts to “authentic (not simulated) problems or questions” (p. 4). Lee, Blackwell, Drake, & Moran (2014) note that while project-based learning has become fairly well-established in K-12 reform, higher education has been slower in adopting project-based methodologies, even though an emphasis on experiential learning, and a liberal education model informed by the related, Deweyian concept of problem-based learning, are by no means novel concepts on college campuses.

Courses that explore the impact of social media on culture and society provide an excellent opportunity for project-based learning. Rather than merely discussing concepts, or exploring case studies, students can apply these concepts to their everyday environments beyond the classroom. The activity described below was used in an interdisciplinary class on mobile storytelling, in which students explored the affordances and constraints of mobile media, with a particular eye toward story and narrative. Through its focus on the location-aware aspects of mobile media, the course also explored the role of digital media in creating and sustaining a sense of place. This activity, and all of the other projects in this course, required students to critically engage in the region in which they found themselves going to school – Southern Appalachia.

This final rationale is indeed site-specific, but with implications that are relevant to other regions and other institutions in the Carolinas, and in fact across the country. Appalachian State University was founded by the Dougherty brothers in 1899 as Watauga Academy to serve school age youth in the mountainous “lost provinces” of Western North Carolina (Mitchem, 2014). Shortly thereafter, the Academy became a state school, specifically to serve the region and to train teachers to serve the public schools in the region. The school grew considerably over the years, and with that growth came a broadening of mission, to the point where in 1967 it became a comprehensive university, and in 1971 became a part of the UNC System. That growth also led to a significant shift in its student demographics as well, such that by 1976, only 22.6% of students came from Watauga County and surrounding counties in Western North Carolina (Office of Institutional and Academic Research, 1977). By fall, 2014, that number was 18.6% (Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Planning, 2015). In short: most

Appalachian State students are outsiders to Appalachia--drawn to the region for a number of reasons, no doubt, but outsiders nonetheless. While this institutional history served as a backdrop for my students throughout the course, as they attempted to develop a more nuanced sense of place beyond the walls of their campus, the regional engagement that provides a context for this project-based digital literacy activity is certainly generalizable to many other campuses and many other regions.

Activity

While the project described below can occur as a stand-alone activity, it is worth noting that it took part within a larger framework of a course devoted to an exploration of what Farman (2014) and others have described as site-specific writing and mobile storytelling. Much of the writing and media production in the class called upon students to think about site-specific writing, what it meant to “write place,” and how place expresses itself in image, word, and daily experience. The course asked them to engage Appalachia as a region--defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission in its own way, but also defined by a number of other cultural, geographic, and economic boundaries as a construct, and one often imposed from outside of the region, rife with positive and negative stereotypes. Needless to say, even as a stand-alone activity, this exercise in project-based learning involves a commitment of more than one class period, plus additional, out-of class activity on the part of students. Within the context of the mobile storytelling course, students spent three class periods over three weeks on this project: the first to orient to the mobile app and website, and to discuss ideas for the project; the second as an out-of-class “content development day”; and the final session to discuss the completed project.

Preparation

Students will need to become familiar with a photo-sharing application called Trover (<http://www.trover.com>), a smartphone app that runs on both Android and iOS mobile devices. They will also need to create a free Trover account. While there are many photo-sharing social media sites and mobile apps, some of which students may already use in their daily media practices, Trover’s design makes it a particularly useful app for this project. Users can search photos by hashtag, and the app will present these tagged images as a cluster of photographs, arranged by proximity to the user’s physical location. The app also provides users with a map interface, which will display all photograph locations as pinpoints on a map. Finally, Trover does not limit the length of texts that users can add as annotation to any given photograph. While designed for photo upload from a mobile device, Trover also allows for geo-tagging and image uploading from a web interface as well. This functionality allowed all students to participate, even if they did not have access to a smartphone.

Planning

Throughout the course, we made heavy use of the metaphors of “hauntings” and “echoes” to try to conceptualize the affective, evocative elements of place memory and its ability to call forth what is still present, but no longer here. Students discussed their own understanding of Appalachia as a region and were called upon to question and explore their own assumptions. We discussed media images of the region, with particular attention to what Williams (2002) refers to as the binary stereotypes of “the quaint and stalwart mountaineer” and the “ignorant and impoverished hillbilly” (p. 199). We also discussed the varying cultural constructions of Appalachia as a place of natural beauty, outdoor

recreation, and tourism—as well as a base for extractive economies, environmental damage, and social deprivation. Students then decided on a thematic focus for their photographs. The only restriction on content was that each photograph should in some way provide a visual commentary that spoke to some aspect of the region—an “Appalachian echo.” Students shared their ideas and gave each other feedback in class and on a discussion board through our course management system.

Image Gathering

Students uploaded at least five photographs from anywhere in the county. Students needed to note the location of each photograph, either through the GPS-enabled features of the mobile app, or by indicating the location on the map interface on the Trover website. Students also provided text to accompany each photograph. The amount of text could vary, but in total, students needed to produce around 500 words total for all five photographs. The goal was to produce text appropriate to the affordances of a smartphone screen—in other words, blocks of text that involved little or no scrolling. The text provided students with an opportunity to reflect in words what they had tried to capture in image. The final step required students to tag the image with #appalachianeoes. The result of their collaboration created a constellation narrative on Trover--a collection of like-tagged reflections on Appalachia as a landscape, a region, and a cultural construct. In order to make this assignment seem even more like a media project intended for a public audience, rather than merely a classroom exercise, I opted to participate as well, contributing my own five images and accompanying text. I would encourage other instructors to do the same.

Discussion

After completing their uploads, students then explored the project as a whole—again, either using the mobile app or the web interface. Students were encouraged to use the map interface as well to experience not only the image on their mobile devices, but also the location in which the photo was taken. They discussed the networked, multifaceted narrative that developed from the collection of photographs and accompanying text. Students reflected on their own practice—the process of deciding what theme they wished to explore, as well as which images they would capture to express this perspective on the region. Students also reflected on the interface design for Trover, noting both its affordances and its constraints as a social media application.

Debriefing

Students responded positively to the assignment. In giving them an opportunity to move their studies beyond the classroom, they had a chance to explore their region in a direct fashion through the use of mobile media. At the same time, they were able to recognize that every photograph reveals not only the image captured, but also the eye and the hand that pointed the camera (or cellphone, as the

case may be). They commented on their own growing awareness of place, and the impact of Trover's location-aware features in creating a constellation narrative of Southern Appalachia, as seen through their eyes.

Appraisal

While this project offers a number of opportunities for students to gain both media literacy skills and a greater sense of local engagement, it does have some limitations. First, of course, is the issue of access to mobile devices or digital cameras. Given that Trover allows for a web-based upload of photographs, a student without a smartphone could still participate, but not without borrowing a camera from our university library's digital equipment check-out service (or, more likely than not, from a classmate or a friend). Another limitation of the project involved, ironically enough, mobility. Nearly half of the class did not have easy access to transportation other than by foot, bike, or public transportation. As a result, many of the images did tend to cluster around campus. Some students, however, did make an effort to move well beyond their normal circles, in effect using the project as a means of becoming more engaged in their local environment. Finally, we should remain mindful that this project runs the risk of functioning as yet another representation of Appalachia from the outside, one that harvests raw material for cultural export, into the classroom and onto the web. Greater community involvement through partnerships with local cultural organizations and heritage groups would help mitigate this risk. Even with these limitations, however, a majority of students found the project engaging and informative—and to some degree transformative in helping them see their region differently. In addition, while individual student engagement varied, many students seemed to gain a better sense of the affordances of mobile devices and social media platforms for creating a coherent, yet multi-faceted sense of place. Writing on urban preservation, Hayden (1997) reflects on how "place memory" can operate as a site-specific trigger to activate the stories and histories of everyday life embedded within a city. She writes, "While a single, preserved historic place may trigger potent memories, networks of such places begin to reconnect social memory on the urban scale.... People invest places with social and cultural meaning, and urban landscape history can provide a framework for connecting those meanings into contemporary urban life" (p. 78). The project described here offers a similar opportunity to mark multiple place memories within a network through critical media practices. This sort of project-based learning activity provides an opportunity for students to engage in their region at a level that is often absent, either because the student is not native to the region, or as is equally likely, is indeed native to the region but has not been given the opportunity to explore, both critically and productively, the hauntings and echoes that define place. Providing students with this sort of active engagement in new media practices, while at the same time encouraging them to think critically about these media practices and their increasingly important role in society, offers a truly dynamic example of digital literacies played out at the intersection of theory and practice.

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