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Reading Critically from the Archives:

James Merrill Linn's Diary as a Gateway to the Past

Courtney Paddick and Carrie Pirmann

Introduction

Archival research and reading from the archives have long been embraced as a scholarly research practice in humanities disciplines. While scholars may spend weeks or months poring over hidden treasures found in archives, undergraduate students are often not exposed to these materials in a hands-on way. However, college and university libraries often have archival collections tucked away that can facilitate learning when used in thoughtfully crafted assignments. In this chapter, we discuss how we used Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) and archival materials to provide students with an opportunity to engage in a close and critical reading of excerpts from the Civil War era diary of James Merrill Linn.

We developed and facilitated the Digital Scholarship Summer Research Fellows (DSSRF) program, an undergraduate summer research experience, at Bucknell University starting in 2017. Through the program, students are introduced to several digital scholarship tools and methodologies (e.g., text analysis and data visualization), which they then integrate into their own digital scholarship projects. The student fellows learn together in a small cohort (four to five students), and hands-on activities give them the opportunity

to explore different methods and experiment with various tools before integrating them into their own projects.¹

Since its advent in 1987,² TEI has become a cornerstone of the digital humanities and a foundational piece of digital humanities curricula.³ Broadly defined, TEI is an established set of guidelines for encoding texts using XML (extensible markup language), rendering them as machine-readable texts from which information can easily be harvested.⁴ Primarily used in the humanities, TEI allows for rich encoding of both the content and structure of texts. Many TEI projects focus on rare, archival, and previously undigitized materials, which are now being brought together in digital collections. Encoding basic bibliographic information about these materials can greatly enhance their findability.⁵ Semantic encoding—marking up texts for elements such as person names, place names, dates, affiliations, occupations, and so forth—can also enable the reader to glean details from large text corpora and uncover new insights from material that previously had to be read as disparate sources. For example, the Lesbian and Gay Liberation in Canada (LGLC) project utilizes two print chronologies of LGBTQ+-related historical events in Canada, which have been carefully and thoroughly encoded.⁶ Users can search the texts via the LGLC website and easily discover all events that happened in a particular location or involved a given organization.

For most of our fellows, who come from a variety of academic disciplines, DSSRF is their first exposure to the digital humanities. As such, we see value in providing them with an introduction to TEI, not only as a digital humanities method in itself but also as part of a broader introduction to the field of digital humanities. We additionally see value in introducing the students to archival research and the process of critically reading and interpreting primary sources. With the help of the Digital Scholarship Coordinator at Bucknell University, we created a three-day workshop that incorporates archival materials into a lesson on TEI. While none of our students have previously created a project utilizing TEI, past DSSRF participants have gone on to work on other transcription and text encoding projects on campus. Throughout our lessons in the archive and TEI, there are numerous opportunities for the students to engage in close and critical reading.

Critical Reading Connection

How does text encoding, which Flanders, Bauman, and Connell describe as “a process of creating a digital model of a textual source using markup: codes that live in the transcription of the text and identify its structure and content,”⁷ facilitate deeper, more critical reading? Text encoding by its very nature involves layers of close reading: analyzing a text to understand its content and making decisions about what aspects of the text to mark up for meaning or structure, which ultimately lead to unique interpretations of a text.⁸ Through close readings of texts, students hone their critical and analytical reading skills and can begin to see new connections and uncover new pieces of information from within a text. Gailey contends TEI encourages students to engage in “attentive reading” and that rather than “cherry picking” pieces of a text, students must engage in a full, close reading of the text to determine what elements they want to encode.⁹

Singer discusses the use of TEI with undergraduate students in a literature seminar, with a particular focus on poetry. In her experience, “digital encoding can become a method of close reading that reimagines literary analysis as a wide-reaching group of skills including searching, sorting, and identifying different sorts of elements.”¹⁰ Giannetti notes that digital editions—often the end products of text encoding—are a type of scholarly production.¹¹ These broad-based skills—searching, sorting, and identifying different types of information—are ones that students can apply in a multitude of other contexts as they navigate the information ecosystem.

Critical reading is a foundational component of text encoding due to the interpretative nature of this work. Fickle views “tagging [or encoding] as an act of interpretation that requires the same skills [students] would use to explain a text’s genre structure, form, and content, and then craft an argument about it.”¹² As described later in this chapter, part of the text encoding process involves developing a schema, or encoding framework, for the documents that are being encoded. Development of a schema relies on knowledge of the text such that important elements (e.g., place names, person names, events) can be identified, and it is only through close reading that encoders can discern the text’s content at this level. When encoded texts are transformed into digital editions, the decisions we make about *what* and *how* to encode are reflected in those editions and impact the ways in which a reader can interact with the text. In this way, encoders and textual editors are creating new knowledge or new interpretations of knowledge.

Teaching Strategies

Our entry point into close reading in the archives is through the diary of James Merrill Linn, a Bucknell graduate and Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, (home of Bucknell) native who served in the Union Army and as a war correspondent during the Civil War. Linn kept a diary and engaged in extensive correspondence with friends and family in Lewisburg during his service. The diary and correspondence, which are housed in the Bucknell University Special Collections/University Archives (SCUA), have never been transcribed and, as a result, serve as excellent material to use as the basis of our lesson on TEI. Archives and special collections often house material that is rich in local or institutional history and offer a pathway to both connect students with and build understanding of the past.¹³ Additionally, correspondence and diaries, often filled with details about people, places, and events, are rich materials for use in teaching the basics of text encoding.¹⁴ If you do not have an appropriate collection in your local archive or special collection, the National Archives’ Citizen Archivist program provides a number of collections available for students to try their hand at transcribing.¹⁵

The TEI workshop is broken into several parts:

- Overview of TEI
- Transcription of a diary page
- A visit to SCUA to view the diary in person
- An exercise in which the students create a general schema to markup the pages
- Learning the TEI schema to mark up the documents within Oxygen XML Editor¹⁶

At each point of the exercise, the students are given another entry point into their text, and at every step, something new is revealed to the student about their document.

Overview of TEI

As a way of introducing TEI, we first ask the students to read Flanders, Bauman, and Connell's chapter entitled "Text Encoding" from *Doing Digital Humanities: Practice, Training, Research*.¹⁷ We also use Miriam Posner's video, "How Did They Make That?,"¹⁸ as a template for analyzing and deconstructing digital humanities projects. Each time we introduce a new digital tool or method, we ask students to employ the process Posner outlines to examine a project that makes use of that same tool and method. Prior to delving into TEI, we ask the students to do an analysis of a well-known TEI project, such as the Women's Writers Project, Map of Early Modern London, or Livingstone Online.¹⁹ Since TEI can be a difficult concept for students to grasp, we find that this exercise helps establish a foundation for the rest of the workshop, as students better understand how the work of transcribing and encoding can lay the groundwork for a larger project.

Transcription of an Archival Text

Before students engage in the transcription process of documents, it is important to discuss the provenance of the materials and the historical context in which they are situated. In the case of the Linn diary, we had conversations with the students about Civil War history, the composition of the armies involved, and military terminology. We also engaged in discussions about the historical differences in language use, particularly around colloquialisms and outdated slang terms that are now considered offensive.

Beginning with digitized versions of individual, sequential pages from Linn's diary, our students embark on the process of transcribing their page of text into a Google Doc. Depending on time, the transcription portion of the assignment can be done entirely in class or can be given as homework. This part of the exercise enables students to engage in a first-pass, close reading of the document. During this stage, we often see that students' initial inclination is to focus most heavily on transcribing word-by-word rather than reading the document for context. When confronted with a word they are unable to transcribe, we remind students to read the sentence or passage for context, as that can often help them ascertain the unknown word even if the writing is not completely clear. Additionally, we have found that many students no longer learn cursive in school; therefore, reading nineteenth-century cursive handwriting adds a layer of complexity to their assignment. While our diary author, James Merrill Linn, has excellent handwriting, this initially poses a problem for some of our students.²⁰ However, every time we do this assignment, the students persevere and adjust to reading Linn's handwriting. We encourage the students to help each other by comparing similarities in the way letters are written, and we actively engage with the students in deciphering particularly confusing passages.

Recognizing that not every student has the same level of comfort in reading nineteenth-century handwriting, nor is English the first language of all our students, we next engage in a group read-through of each student's transcription. Much like figuring out

the way puzzle pieces fit together, our students can help each other decipher words or even individual letters in the text to fill in the blanks and create an accurate as possible transcription. Through the act of reading aloud, students also begin reading for context and start to deeply engage with the content they have been reading.

Visiting the Archives

Our next step is to allow students to connect the digital artifacts with which they have been working to the actual, physical diary pages. We have chosen to introduce the students to the materials in a digitized format first, rather than the physical diary pages first, for several reasons. From a logistical point of view, the diary pages are written on both sides of each page, so it would be impossible for two students to work on sequential pages at the same time. Additionally, the digitized images allow the students to zoom in on aspects of the pages for a closer view. And finally, the “reveal” of the physical pages is so gratifying every time we run this workshop. The students are so accustomed to seeing their individual diary pages fill their computer screen, so it comes as a shock when they view the physical pages and learn they are roughly the size of a small paperback. During the visit to the archives, students take time to carefully examine the pages using magnifying glasses and in doing so are often able to successfully decipher a few more words from their diary entries (figure 10.1). In some cases, students said they found reading and interpreting the physical items easier than reading the digitized versions.



Figure 10.1

Students examining pages from James Merrill Linn's diary during a visit to Bucknell University's Special Collections and University Archives

In addition to spending time with the Linn papers collection, the university archivist or assistant archivist provides an overview of the purpose and operation of the University Archives and Special Collections. For most of our students, this is the first time they have visited an archive, and the behind-the-scenes look is a positive experience.

TEI Introduction/Developing a Schema

Once the students have a completed transcription, next we begin the introduction to TEI. For this step, we combine the students' transcriptions into a single shared Google Doc and ask the students to begin identifying the details of the documents that they believe are significant and would be meaningful to a future researcher or reader of these documents. Students quickly identify things like place names, people, military terms, and weather (James Merrill Linn spends a lot of time reporting on the weather) but then begin to expand their thinking. This leads to discussion about concepts such as: moods or feelings; identifying misspellings, grammatical errors, or words that were crossed out; and questions of whether pronouns should be linked to the person(s) Linn is referencing. Once the students have identified and made a list of specific details of importance, we ask them to color code their document accordingly (e.g., people are highlighted in red, places in blue, etc.). As they complete this assignment, more questions begin to arise, such as, "How do we code something if it falls into two categories?" Without knowing it, the students are beginning to ask the questions that TEI seeks to answer. This step is an excellent precursor to beginning the work of learning how to encode a document using TEI.

This exercise can be modified by skipping the steps of transcribing a document by hand and visiting the archives and beginning with an already transcribed document. However, one of our learning goals is to have students understand the process and work that goes into a text encoding project from start to finish. As previously noted, we ask the students to look at large-scale TEI projects at the beginning of the workshop. One of the examples we typically point them to—the Women Writers Project—has been worked on by hundreds of researchers and students since its founding in 1988. The time our students spend transcribing and encoding one diary page helps them fully appreciate the time and expertise involved in much larger-scale projects. Our students also begin to understand how the conversations they had in the previous steps, as well as those had while encoding, are the types of conversations and decision-making that must go into any large-scale TEI project.

Encoding Documents in Oxygen XML Editor

At this point in the workshop, we begin the work of encoding the documents using TEI. Documents are encoded using Oxygen XML Editor, a standard XML editing software. We provide students with a basic XML file, which includes the TEI header metadata and the schema, so they can insert their transcribed diary page into the XML document. Students are introduced to the basic mechanics of how to work within an XML environment, and then we transition into discussing how to take the markup done in the shared Google Doc and convert it into TEI tags. Normally, we start simply with dates, place names, and person names, and from there, students really begin to run with the process.

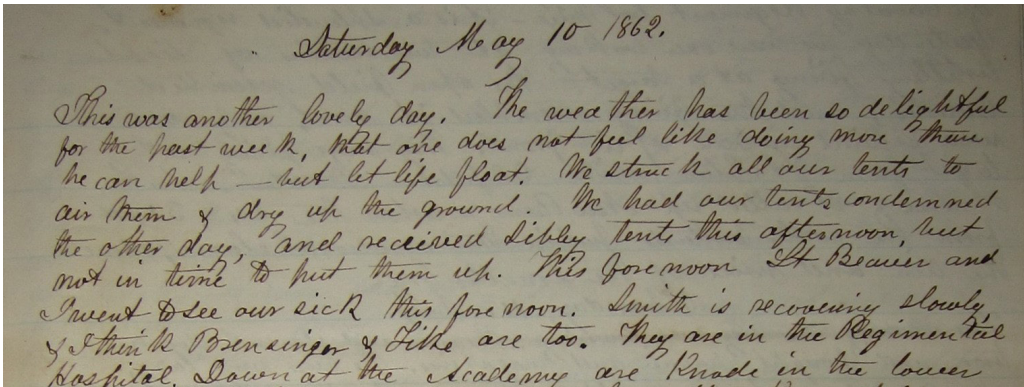


Figure 10.2

A passage from James Merrill Linn's diary

Saturday <date calendar="1862.05.10"> May 10 1862. </date>

This was another <state-desc n="weather">lovely day</desc</state>. The weather has been so <state-desc n="weather">delightful </desc</state> <lb/> for the <time>last week</time>, that one does not feel like doing more than <lb/> he can help - but let life <state-desc n="feeling">float</desc</state>. We struck all our <objectType>tents</objectType> to <lb/> air them dry on the ground. We had our <objectType>tents</objectType> condemned <lb/> <time>the other day</time>, and received Libby <objectType>tents</objectType> <time>this afternoon</time>, but <lb/> not in time to put them up. This forenoon <roleName>Lt</roleName>-<persName>Beaver</persName> and <lb/> I went to see our sick this <time>forenoon</time>. <persName>Smith</persName> is <state-desc n="health">recovering slowly</desc</state>, <lb/> & I think <persName>Bensinger</persName> & <persName>Fike</persName> are too. They are in the <placeName>Regimental Hospital</placeName><lb/>. Down at the <placeName>Academy</placeName> are <persName>Rhode</persName> in the <state-desc n="place">lower

Figure 10.3

A passage of the same text from James Merrill Linn's diary encoded in TEI

During the three iterations of the workshop, we have observed the students navigating a number of issues that arise when working with original documents. Every group of students has discussed whether it is important to maintain the integrity of the original written text: Should they maintain things like misspellings, cross-outs, and line breaks, or is it more important to make those corrections for the ease of a reader? (Each group came to a different conclusion.) Our observations are similar to those of a participant in Green's study, who felt that text encoding "changed the way [students] read.... You could see it when they were encoding that they were reading every single word and noting every punctuation mark and that they were reading in a way they hadn't before."²¹

Although students are working on their individual diary pages throughout the encoding steps, we do ask them to come to agreements and make collective decisions about how they will encode the texts. This often leads to lively discussions. One cohort engaged in spirited debate as they wrestled with the question of whether death should be encoded as a state, trait, or event in TEI. Since text encoding is truly an interpretive process, it calls upon the students to engage with the text at a deep level and negotiate with what the text is saying, in concert with making decisions about how various elements or portions of the text are encoded. While they may not realize it, these activities are all reinforcing the skills of critical and close reading.

Discussion

Whether or not students go on to work on TEI projects after engaging in this activity isn't as important as the skills they develop throughout the process. Since our students are the first transcribers of the diary entries, they feel deep ownership of the pages and, for perhaps the first time, know what it feels like to contribute to a larger, scholarly endeavor. Engaging in textual encoding means the students are not only reading closely for context that matters to them but they are also forced to consider how future researchers may utilize these documents in their own research and study. As Brooks notes, "The process of selecting tags forced students to critically evaluate the text and their own analysis."²² Students begin to see how research is open to interpretation and how there can be many different approaches and entry points into one text or research question. They also learn the important role archival materials play in uncovering new details about past events and how those events were experienced by individuals.

For our purposes, the TEI workshop serves as a springboard to understanding the questions we ask of texts as scholars. Our workshop serves as an introduction to TEI, but more importantly, it is asking students to think critically about the texts and data they will encounter as they begin their research projects. The TEI workshop places students in the driver's seat and forces them to make decisions as scholars. Throughout the workshop, we ask students to question the text they are reading and to think about not only what they see of value in the text but how it may be interpreted by others. As the students develop their projects, they ask themselves the same questions they did when they were encoding their diary pages: What questions are important to me as the researcher? How will future researchers want to use my work? Am I imposing my own biases on my research/data? And are my interpretations the original intent of the resource material? The TEI workshop has primed them to look at both the big picture as well as elements of their own projects at a more granular level.

Conclusion

The TEI exercise described here offers multiple ways for students to engage in new and different readings of a text. Working with primary sources was new for most of our students, and the opportunity to read historically about an event (the Civil War), which they had all learned about previously, offered new perspectives. In addition, they learned the value of close reading and how we can examine archival materials to isolate information about specific people, events, and places. As librarians, we developed new methods for guiding students in the process of reading both holistically and for context and have put these skills to use in other digital humanities classes and projects.

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O'Neill, Head of Special Collections and University Archivist; Crystal Matjasic, former Assistant University Archivist and Records Management Coordinator; and Eir Danielson, Assistant University Archivist and Records Management Coordinator.

Notes

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