

NEWCASTLE CASE STUDY

**WRITING
NEW WORLDS -
TEACHING WITH
*GALE DIGITAL
SCHOLAR LAB***



INTRODUCTION TO NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

Newcastle University prides itself on being an outward looking, research-intensive institution with campuses in London, Singapore and Malaysia, with a vision of “From Newcastle. For the World”. Regularly appearing in the world’s top 200 universities, Newcastle promotes research-led teaching and views digital humanities as a strategic priority within their Humanities Research Institute.



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WRITING NEW WORLDS – TEACHING WITH GALE DIGITAL SCHOLAR LAB

Module SEL2202, or Writing New Worlds 1688-1789, has been running for several years in the school of English Literature, Language & Linguistics at Newcastle University. The module typically attracts between 100 and 130 second year students from many disciplines, with the majority from English Literature. The course catalogue¹ summarises the module’s aim to, ‘develop students’ ability to consider literary texts in their historical and cultural contexts; to analyse textual form and content in detail; and to communicate their critical responses to these texts in speech and writing’. Module leader, Dr James Harriman-Smith explains the module theme: “the eighteenth century was a period where new worlds were created in literature, so whether that was a response to actual colonial practices in the period or whether it was a fantasy or satire, we work through different kinds of literary responses to new worlds each week”. Dr Leanne Stokoe, one of the lecturers delivering the course alongside Dr Harriman-Smith, expands on these themes, “The module is trying to uncover different voices – we look at women writers, people of colour, working class writers, that don’t immediately spring to mind when you think about Isaac Newton and the Enlightenment.

It’s all about getting students to challenge what they think when they think about the eighteenth century and understand it’s rarely like preconceptions at all”.

Covid-19 has affected Writing New Worlds, as it has most teaching and instruction in Universities around the world. Dr Stokoe summarises the challenge faced by lecturers asked to rapidly move a course from in person to online, “we haven’t been trained for this at all - I didn’t know how to examine an online course or teach online. It’s been a massive learning curve for everyone”.

For many years, one of the core resources for the module has been Gale’s archive *Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO)*, a huge collection featuring most of the significant books from the eighteenth century. Dr Harriman-Smith explains, “I’ve tended to use these tools as ways of cultivating independence and a greater breadth and richness in my teaching than I would be able to do within the constraints of set texts or published editions.” He continues, “I’m training these students to learn what it’s like to work professionally on literature of the past, and digital approaches are just a fundamental part of that now”.

¹ <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/module-catalogue/module.php?code=SEL2202>

USING GALE DIGITAL SCHOLAR LAB IN THE CLASSROOM

In October 2020, staff at Newcastle were introduced to *Gale Digital Scholar Lab*, a text and data mining platform combining Gale's broad collection of primary source archives with powerful analytical tools. Instantly, Dr Stokoe saw potential for the tool within the Writing New Worlds module: "Obviously I've used online archives and manuscripts, but I would never have turned to the technology Gale is introducing us to with the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab*. I would never have known how to do that, never known how to access that information before. I was really struck by the overlap between what it can be used for and what we're getting the students to do with their close reading skills".

The plan was to use the *Lab* to support one of the formative assessments on the module: a keyword essay which asks students to think about a text and a keyword jointly so that each illuminates the other. Dr Harriman-Smith explains, "One thing this module has always had is an assessment around keywords. In previous years, we would tend to do this in quite a restricted way with the students; in seminars, we'd ask 'what kind of keywords would you give to this text or passage?'. We'd be a bit more directive in helping them discover other texts, to find ways of illustrating the keywords".

Dr Stokoe outlines a common issue that can develop in this assessment, "we get them to choose a keyword from a list in the assignment rubric, and then they go and research it. We are noticing when marking those essays that they tend to go to the OED (Oxford English Dictionary) as their first port of call - if they're citing oppression or liberty, the first thing they do is go to the dictionary. They should be reading some secondary sources, seeing relevant secondary criticism as a way to define the period". For Dr Stokoe, using the *Lab* presented an opportunity for student research: "Using *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* in conjunction with their research skills might steer them away from that a little bit because it's actually revealing things about the text, rather than just speaking very generally about the keywords."

Dr Harriman-Smith describes the format of the module, "the course ran over 10 weeks - in week 2 we had a very simple introduction to *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* to get them to meet the interface and find a text. With that under their belts, in the last week of term we then introduce them to *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* where we are saying, 'okay, here's a more sophisticated way of thinking about this, where you can build your portfolio, put texts together, do some kind of analysis on these texts'. That week, our module topic was around enslavement in the eighteenth century, bringing together material we'd done on every week so far about slavery imagery and the representation of slavery during this period, but this time making it our complete focus."

The week's teaching focused on two set texts, Phillis Wheatley's *On Being Brought from Africa to America* (1773)² and Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* (1789)³. Dr Stokoe explains why using the *Lab* was of such benefit when working with these, "it can be used specifically, to highlight words that come up a lot in a text, it can highlight things about an author's ethnicity or gender, it can uncover things about a text that reading broadly, or traditional literary approaches don't immediately pick up. And what we're trying to get the students to do is to close read - to pick apart sentences, metaphors and imagery".

In preparation for the workshop, students were asked to watch introductory videos to *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* and read materials about the creation of digital archives, highlighting the need to think critically when using them. They were then given an exercise to build a small content set in the *Lab* using either the set texts or a selection of documents of their choice. Following this, they were asked to apply a simple Topic Modelling tool and an Ngram analysis to the content set that they had created. This example would then be used in the workshop to explain the processes in the *Lab* and discuss the outputs of their analyses, including using them to generate a list of keywords for their texts.

2 Wheatley, Phillis. Poems on various subjects, religious and moral. By Phillis Wheatley, negro servant to Mr. John Wheatley, of Boston, in New England. Printed for A. Bell, Bookseller, Aldgate; and sold by Messrs. Cox and Berry, King-Street, Boston, MDCCCLXXIII. [1773]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0111593426/ECCO?u=webdemo&sid=ECCO&xid=554ad83b&pg=1. Accessed 30 Mar. 2021

3 Equiano, Olaudah. The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by himself. ... 2nd ed., vol. 1, printed and sold for the author, by T. Wilkins, No. 23, Aldermanbury; sold also by Mr. Johnson, St. Paul's Church-Yard; Mr. Buckland, Paternoster-Row; Messrs Robson and Clark, Bond-Street; Mr. Davis, opposite Gray's-Inn, Holborn; Mr. Matthews, Strand; Mr Stockdale, Piccadilly; Mr. Richardson, Royal Exchange; Mr. Kearsley, Fleet-Street; and the booksellers in Oxford and Cambridge, [1789]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CW0101534748/ECCO?u=webdemo&sid=ECCO&xid=ec0f2928&pg=1. Accessed 30 Mar. 2021.

OUTCOMES OF USING *GALE DIGITAL SCHOLAR LAB* AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

For Dr Harriman-Smith, one of the advantages of using the *Lab* in the module was the autonomy it gave to students, “now, because of *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* we were able to get them to find their own keywords and analyse them - that’s particularly helpful because, although the assessment dictated keywords to the students, there was room still to explore what terms occur with it, or which ones occur near it, or whether there is a network of terms around that specific keyword. Some of the best work we saw was thinking in those terms.”

According to Dr Stokoe, many in the class appreciated “the way that you could use [*Gale Digital Scholar Lab*] from very general to specific, that you could be looking for specific keywords and how those keywords re-occur across different texts, as well as quantitative aspects - just literally counting how many times that word appeared in a text field. We did that with Wheatley, when we were interested in the amount of religious rhetoric there was, and that says a lot qualitatively about how much she has been influenced by her Quaker owners, how she’s been moulded and indoctrinated by Western values. There is a quite an interesting overlap between numbers and words and qualitative and quantitative data.”

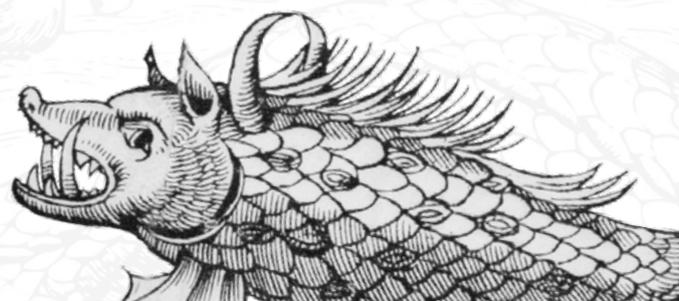
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The feedback on the session was very positive. For Dr Stokoe, “I was surprised by how easy it was once you had an introduction to it”, and as Dr Harriman-Smith says, “there was a group of students who found it really liberating to be able to just go out and find things, to put them together and organise them - it’s a very visible way of doing research”.

The positive influence of *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* on student outcomes is explained by Dr Harriman-Smith, “certainly some of the essays I marked drew from a wide range of materials, for example, wider than I’ve seen in previous years, to discuss when they were writing on a text to do with slavery”. Dr Stokoe continues, “I was surprised by how many questions we got about it... they wanted to know more about it, some of them are already thinking about careers in that area”.

Dr Harriman-Smith plans to expand the role of *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* in the Writing New Worlds module, “in future years, I would probably build the *Lab* in from the start. We don’t necessarily need a smaller task around *ECCO* - instead they could build a portfolio across the module. Starting off with something where they could collect texts in the *Lab* in week 2, and then every week they have to find a text published around that time to do with enslavement in that period. So, as we work through each of the years, they see the different ways people talk about, or in fact did not talk about slavery in the eighteenth century. Then by the time we get to week twelve they will have a ready-made portfolio to start using some of these more advanced analysis techniques on”.

Dr Stokoe agrees, seeing potential for other modules she teaches. “I would love to do another session for my Gothic module next year, I really would.” For her, using *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* provides a new set of tools that can enhance the development of skills, “It wasn’t something that I would have thought of before in terms of helping to develop close reading. And I know it can be used for much more than that, but I think for the purpose of a literature student, it really is an extra tool that they have in addition to the more traditional kind of research we do”.



INSTITUTIONAL AND STUDENT BENEFITS

As well as the positives of using *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* on the module, there are specific advantages, both for the student and the institution.

For students, there are the transferrable, employer-attracting skills developed through using the *Lab* to analyse large sets of data and interpret the results. Dr Harriman-Smith outlines the benefits to the student post-academia, “in third year modules we often ask them to produce material that they can then use as evidence when they’re thinking about their job applications. I think one of the skills they get from doing this is also a sense of what technology can and cannot do. They simultaneously discover that they can find out lots of things about a text very quickly, but also, I think they get a reflection of, ‘oh yeah there’s things that I as a human reader can only do’. Actually, gathering both of them when it works is one of the best things they can learn from this - to manage digital and more traditional questions.” Dr Stokoe is also clear on the employability benefits to students of incorporating these techniques in the classroom, “I’ve also got some skills in digital humanities’ - that can go on their CV. Of course, it’s great studying literature, but we’re preparing them for the world beyond academia”.

Like many leading research institutions, Newcastle University has invested significantly over many years to build up a large collection of archive resources to fuel research, and laterally, teaching. Dr Stokoe identifies the advantage using the *Lab* can bring to any University with significant digital archive collections, “using the *Lab* definitely gives you an insight into the text that maybe you wouldn’t get just from reading the material, and it does save you time as well, if you think about it purely from a textual interpretation perspective. If you’re looking for something really specific in a very long eighteenth-century novel, you can type that in as a keyword and it can give you lots of information about the frequency of occurrences, Dr Harriman-Smith talks about the benefit of widening the scope to include all of the University’s collections in a research query, “one thing the *Lab* does is It pushes people away from just using *ECCO* or just using Burney or whatever, and to think more across collections”.

This is borne out in an analysis of the usage of *Gale Primary Sources* at Newcastle University. Using *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* typically leads to an increase in the use of primary sources at an institution, a trend which is readily apparent in this case. Around the period that *Writing New Worlds* introduced the *Lab* into the classroom (November 2020-February 2021), primary source sessions at Newcastle increased by 14% and Searches increased by 8%, compared to the previous year.

For Dr Stokoe and Dr Harriman-Smith, the future is exciting and involves integrating digital scholarship techniques, and *Gale Digital Scholar Lab*, earlier and more widely. Dr Harriman-Smith says, “I would like every student who does one of our degrees here to have had at least a chance to be exposed to [digital humanities]. It isn’t something that’s going to appeal to everyone, but I think I want it to have some importance, just so people know how the world is running and where the research that they are reading has come from. Specifically, I think in terms of teaching, I’d like the students to have that exposure to cultivate that kind of critical consciousness of digital materials”.

Dr Stokoe concludes, “I think it should be brought much more to the fore from a teaching perspective. I didn’t know a thing about this, so it was really great to hear about it - I had no idea you could use it for teaching in this way. I didn’t know there were all these tools that you could use and relatively simply teach students how to use them as well. So, even if it was just as simple as introducing some of these workshops into first year courses more, across different degrees. Maybe in a few years’ time we’ll see this kind of software being used much more in a teaching capacity”.

What is certain is that integrating *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* into the *Writing New Worlds* module had a significant effect on its usage at Newcastle University. After the workshop in December 2020, Content Sets created in the *Lab* by the University increased by 78% compared to the previous month. Similarly, despite the fact that students on the module were being asked to create content sets of two documents, in December 2020 and January 2021 the University averaged over 1,000 documents added to content sets, suggesting that students were taking the digital skills learned in the module and applying them to other courses to fuel their studies.

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