

# Travels in the Digital Humanities



## A Journey to Italy

This course will focus on digitally reconstructing a journey to Italy in the early 20th century. We will begin our investigation with a mysterious black box which gathered dust in a faculty office for decades. Its fragile contents revealed ghostly images of an Italian journey, images captured by an obsolete and obscure technology. Over the course of thirteen weeks, we will explore the mysteries of this box, identifying and mapping its photographic travelogue. We will learn about the technology necessary to document the journey and we will examine the historic and literary context of similar travels to Italy. Students will scour Bowdoin's special collections holdings for clues, and they will be encouraged to carry out extended individual projects based on their investigations. We will then assemble our knowledge in a collaborative digital recreation of this journey.

Is this a humanities course? Or a course in the use of digital technology in the humanities?

### Required Texts

Douglas Rushkoff, *Program or Be Programmed*  
Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*  
Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*  
Henry James, *Italian Hours*  
Edith Wharton, *Italian Backgrounds, Roman Fever and Other stories*  
D.H. Lawrence, *D.H. Lawrence and Italy*

And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of the rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolutions of the stars, but themselves they consider not.

(Frances Petrarca, *The Ascent of Mount Ventoux*)

It is both!

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# Course Goals

*By the end of the semester, you should:*

- be able to articulate some of the benefits and the drawbacks of using digital tools to approach literary analysis and humanistic study more generally
- be able to situate developments in digital technology of the past several decades within the broader historical context of textual technologies
- possess a working knowledge of a collection of digital tools that you can use to help you in your studies
- be able to critically interrogate the way you use the internet to get information, produce content and interact with others
- have attained a high degree of digital literacy, including the ability to critically evaluate online sources and navigate efficiently through large amounts of information

*Transferable skills that you should develop:*

- the ability to express yourself across a range of written genres (eg. informative prose suitable for an encyclopedia entry; scholarly argument; writing appropriate to informal online discussions)
- the capacity to critically evaluate information
- a familiarity with a range of skills (including markup, text mining applications, georeferencing, social network analysis)
- the ability to work with others in a digital environment (through collaborative activities such as co-constructing a document)

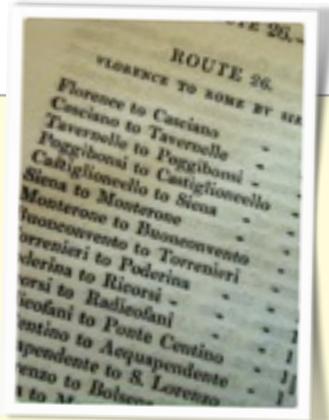


When human beings acquired language, we learned not just how to listen but how to speak. When we gained literacy, we learned not just how to read but how to write. And as we move into an increasingly digital reality, we must learn not just how to use programs, but how to *make* them.

In the emerging, highly programmed landscape ahead, you will either create the software or you will be the software. It's really that simple: Program, or be programmed. Choose the former, and you gain access to the control panel of civilization. Choose the latter, and it could be the last real choice you get to make.

For while digital technologies are in many ways a natural outgrowth of what went before, they are also markedly different. Computers and networks are more than mere tools. They are like living things themselves. Unlike a rake, a pen or even a jackhammer, digital technology is programmed. This means it comes with instructions not just for its use, but also for itself. And as such technologies come to characterize the future of the way we live and work, the people programming them take on an increasingly important role in shaping our world and how it works.

Douglas Rushkoff, *Program Or Be Programmed. Ten Commands for the Digital Age.*



*This is the shortest route from Florence to Rome. . . a diligence performs the journey in thirty-six hours; the courier's carriage is still more expeditious. The vetturini require at least five days and generally six. With post-horses it may be done in four days.*

*(Murray's Handbook of Central Italy and Rome)*

## Our journey

### **Participation: 15%**

This is an experimental class based on collaborative discourse. Students should come to class prepared to engage vigorously with the day's material, your peers, and me.

### **Blog: 15%**

Throughout the semester, we will engage with the ideas of the course through a CAS protected blog.

Blogging is most successful when sustained by an energetic (and sometimes even chaotic!) community. You will be expected to collectively establish and adhere to community guidelines for posts.

### **Collaborations: 20%**

Each collaboration introduces a "digital" problem related to the course material. Specific digital tools in humanities computing will be introduced and hands-on

experimentation will ensue. No prior experience in humanities computing is expected.

### **Assignments: 10%**

You will write three "traditional" essay assignments, each one not exceeding three pages. As some of these may feed into your final project, I may ask for revisions.

### **Final project: 40%**

The shape and direction of your final project will be determined by you: by the digital tools you most readily adopted, by the portions of the course which inspired your enthusiasm, and by your own personal disposition.

An important requirement, however, will be that your final project "fit" in some way with our collective digital endeavor.

## A mysterious black box



I started going over the files yesterday, newly digitized reproductions of glass lantern slides from the early 20th century. They gathered dust for decades in a black box forgotten in the corner of a campus office, their technology obsolete.

The collection is a valuable visual archive in multiple respects. The photographs were taken during several grand tours of Italy between 1904 and 1912 and provide a unique perspective on the history of Anglophone tourism in Italy. They also provide precious historical documentation of cultural heritage sites in cities such as Florence, Venice, Assisi and Rome. Finally, the technology employed to reproduce these photographs indicates that their use was a public one: whether in the classroom for the undergraduates or at public lectures, the lantern slide was the technology of choice for projecting images for a large audience. Their extensive use in education at the turn of the 19th century is also evinced by the large number of lantern slides found in the library at Bowdoin.