Turning students into scholars: using digital methods to teach the critical study of religion

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ABSTRACT

Incorporating digital tools into Religious Studies courses provides experiences and conditions that transform students into scholars. In this essay we discuss two courses we taught in conjunction with the Religious Soundmap Project of the Global Midwest, a collaborative digital humanities project that we co-directed from 2014 to 2016. Engaging students as contributors to a collaborative digital research project helped them to appreciate some of the key practical, theoretical, and ethical challenges that we face as scholars of religion. In particular, our work together brought to the fore critical questions about definition, classification, and representation. Even more, because they knew their work would be accessible to broader audiences outside the classroom, potentially including the very communities whom they were studying, students were able to perceive the stakes of these questions in ways we had not previously experienced. Incorporating digital tools enabled our students to see themselves as scholars of religion.

In 2014 we began work on The Religious Soundmap Project of the Global Midwest, a digital humanities research project centered on the question: what does religion in the global Midwest *sound* like? It started as a collaborative summer pilot program between researchers at Ohio State University and Michigan State University and evolved into a two-year endeavor. The inspiration to work together as co-directors arose from a funding opportunity from the Humanities Without Walls consortium, an initiative that challenges humanities researchers to collaborate across institutions. From its inception our project involved student participation in specifically designed courses as well as paid researchers apart from classroom instruction. Over the two-year lifespan of the grant we constantly balanced pedagogical questions with our research goals. In this essay, we offer reflections on what we learned about the use of digital methods in teaching Religious Studies, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Our goal for The Religious Soundmap Project of the Global Midwest was to construct a digital platform for a general audience to experience the religious diversity of the American Midwest through sounds. To that end, student researchers recorded, edited, and archived religious sounds in Columbus, Ohio, and mid-Michigan. The sound clips,

along with images, explanatory texts, and interview excerpts, were integrated onto a publicly accessible online platform. The structure of our courses combined theoretical content-based activities on religion, sound, and community-engaged research with the acquisition of needed technical skills such as audio equipment use, audio editing, tagging, and managing digital content. The students produced multimedia digital exhibits, using sound, image, and text to showcase particular sites and communities. We designed our courses to allow ample time for discussion of the ethical implications of community-based research attending to the particular concerns of digital representation. Through classroom discussions and activities aimed at unpacking these ethical concerns, we discovered that incorporating digital tools provides unique pedagogical opportunities for religious studies teachers and students.

Religious Studies courses that engage digital scholarship and use digital technology allow instructors to address primary theoretical questions and teach basic research skills. Using digital tools enables students to combine critical thinking with practical tasks that transform the classroom learning experience. Depending on the specific pedagogical aims, employing digital tools can increase student ownership of critical theoretical issues in the study of religion and encourage sustained engagement with the field.

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In 2014–2015 we both taught courses that included activities connected to the project. Students in those classes recorded religious sounds that were uploaded onto a digital platform and deposited into our sonic archive. Recording religious sounds was contextualized within course content (readings, discussions, and writing) and course activities (learning necessary digital skills and visiting sites). The classes at MSU and OSU were different, but the goal of incorporating the Religious Soundmap of the Global Midwest into student learning remained the same.

In the fall semester Amy DeRogatis taught an upper-level undergraduate seminar at MSU, 'Religion and the Senses.' The syllabus was designed around the topic of the relationship between religion and the senses with a focus on sound. The central task for the students was to conduct community-based research that featured identifying and recording religious sounds. Rather than write and submit a traditional 15-page research paper, students were required to upload their writing, images, sounds, and bibliography onto a course digital gallery page. Some of the student research also contributed to the Religious Soundmap of the Global Midwest. The class sessions were dedicated to discussions of theoretical and methodological scholarship on religion and the senses, workshops to gain the necessary technical skills, and collaborative activities to advance students' individual research. Specialists in audio recording and digital humanities were invited into the classroom to conduct the trainings. Over the course of the semester, as students made choices about how to choose, categorize, and present religious sounds on a public digital platform, they increasingly became invested in the research process. The immediacy and relevance of the choices they made about what to include or exclude on a public platform led to conversations about how scholars define and categorize religion. By the end of the semester, the students realized that some of the tasks that they needed to accomplish in order to put their work onto a digital platform helped them to connect our shared theoretical and methodological readings to their specific research process.

In May 2015, Isaac Weiner taught a unique month-long course at OSU, 'Listening for Religion,' which explored the interconnections of religion, sound, and space. The course included a mix of undergraduate and graduate students, ranging from introductory-level students with no prior experience to PhD students in religious studies and ethnomusicology. We met twice a week for four weeks, with each session lasting close to five hours. This unusual configuration allowed for a creative use of classroom time. In a single session, we could discuss theoretical and content-focused readings, participate in a hands-on skills-based workshop led by a guest facilitator, leave the classroom to apply our new knowledge, and return to reflect on our experience. The class featured visits from specialists, ranging from ethnomusicologists and sound artists to digital librarians and audio producers, as well as a number of field trips. In the end, students worked in groups to produce digital gallery exhibits, integrating audio clips, images, and text to showcase particular communities and sites from around central Ohio. These exhibits were shared publicly on the OSU Folklore Archives website. The recordings that the students produced were also integrated into the Religious Soundmap Project of the Global Midwest.

We scheduled our course sessions knowing that students' fluency in social media does not translate to being 'digital natives.' Before the classes began, we lined-up specialists at our universities to run in-class workshops and we scheduled ample time for practicing and reflecting on the experience of using newly acquired tools. These hands-on activities modeled the collaborative nature of digital humanities. The students learned that a successful digital project requires working with many people who bring different skills and capabilities to the assignment. They also discovered that working together on a specific task helped them advance their individual research projects.

In each course students were required to conduct research with a particular community. Interacting with living people and having to explain the public nature of their research created a framework for students to appreciate the stakes of their scholarship. Our students were aware that their work would be part of an ongoing research project that had a life beyond the class. They also knew that the subjects of their research would have the opportunity to engage online with their scholarship. The public engagement that was embedded in the structure of the courses and facilitated by the digital tools raised the stakes for the quality of their work, encouraged them to take ownership of their research choices, and provided an immediate context for them to understand their roles as scholars.

Engaging students as contributors to a collaborative digital research project helped them to appreciate some of the key practical, theoretical, and ethical challenges that we face as scholars of religion. In particular, our work together brought to the fore critical questions about definition, classification, and representation. These are themes that instructors regularly address in religious studies classrooms and that can fruitfully be explored in any number of ways. Yet, for reasons having to do with the distinct opportunities and constraints afforded by digital tools and platforms, we found our work with students on the Religious Soundmap Project to offer a particularly effective way of engaging them around these issues. Even more, because they knew their work would be accessible to broader audiences outside the classroom, potentially including the very communities whom they were studying, students were able to perceive the stakes of definitional, classificatory, and representational questions in ways we had not previously experienced. To

our immense pride and satisfaction, students seemed to genuinely appreciate why these issues mattered.

This work began with the seemingly straightforward question of where and what to record. Go listen for religion outside of the classroom, we prompted. Where will you find it? What does it sound like? And how do you know it when you hear it? In this way, deciding what to record confronted students at the outset with the problem of defining religion. What constitutes religion and/or religious sound? Is it found only in particular times and places, like institutional houses of worship? Is it associated with particular kinds of communities or practices? Does it refer primarily to the organized sounds of communal prayer or formal liturgy, akin to something like the category of 'sacred music'? Or might we imagine it more capaciously, more playfully even, in which case what other spaces might we explore, and what other sounds might we attend to? Conversely, what if religion was essentially something private, personal, and internalized? Would it even make sense in that case to approach it through sound at all? These questions cut to the heart of the work we do as scholars of religion. Rather than take any answers for granted, we used them as an occasion for self-conscious reflection. We invited students to interrogate their own assumptions about the category of religion and guided them through a series of exercises and readings meant to complicate and deepen their thinking. Gradually, they came to appreciate how difficult it is to define religion, religious practice, and religious sounds.

These definitional challenges invariably confront any scholar or student of religion. Yet, because our assignment required students not only to listen for religion but to produce a digital field recording that could easily be shared with others, we found that students came to feel particularly accountable for the choices they made. Through the process they also came to understand why such choices *mattered*; that is, to perceive the problem of defining religion as not just an academic question, but one with real stakes, that might potentially matter to the very people whom they were recording.

For example, a number of our students were interested in recording practices associated with food preparation and consumption. In one case, a student researcher contacted a local church about recording the ambient sounds of an annual pig roast. She thought it offered an opportunity to document a communal practice associated with a 'traditional' religious institution, taking place in a 'traditional' religious space, yet removed from the sounds of formal worship. She wanted to suggest that convivial conversation, laughter, and the crackling of a fire might be conceived of as at least, if not more, 'religious' than the sounds of organized prayer. She faced reluctance, however, from her contact at the church. He was enthusiastic about the project in general, but he did not think of the pig roast as 'religious' and therefore did not deem it representative of his religious community. Our student was confronted with an important tension between her interests as a scholar and those of her subjects. They did not agree about what constituted 'religion,' and this disagreement had real practical and ethical implications, forcing her (and us) to reflect self-consciously on why this question mattered, on what was at stake for them and for us. In the end, they compromised. The church granted her permission to record the pig roast, but only on the condition that she also records a formal worship service. In this way, her recordings effectively represent 'religion' not as an objective reality in the world, but as the product of encounter and negotiation between differently interested parties. Her recordings preserve and document the very tension that gave rise to them.

Through experiences such as this one, our students came to perceive religious and secular not as fixed categories or essential properties of particular spaces and sounds, but as fluid and malleable, shaped by the interests of scholars and those they study. As anthropologists Jeanette Jouli and Annelies Moors have put it, 'Sounds may move into and out of the category of the religious in the course of their production, circulation, and consumption, depending on the intentions of those engaging with them' (2014, 983). To produce a recording of 'religious sound,' therefore, was to advance an argument about what they thought religion was – or, at least, which aspects of religion they felt warranted our attention. By participating in this project, students learned to identify what at first appeared to be mundane decisions, such as where to position themselves in a space or how to direct their handheld digital recorders, as interpretive choices. Significantly, they came to see the 'data' of religious studies as not simply existing out there in the world, waiting to be documented and analyzed, but as constructed, in part, through the very choices we make about how and what to study.

Our students also confronted classificatory dilemmas when 'tagging' their recordings upon submission. In order to make the recordings in our database searchable, we invited students to assign them keywords, labeling each recording according to a range of categories, such as religious tradition, musical instrument, or type of space. At first, we prompted the students with a list of relatively open-ended questions, which allowed them maximal flexibility and leeway in how they selected and assigned their keywords. We wanted to empower them to make their own decisions about how to tag each recording and to learn from the choices they made. This led to unanticipated complications. When assigning religious tradition, for example, some students labeled their recordings 'Protestant' while others used the term 'Protestantism.' Some students chose 'Jewish' while others selected 'Reform Judaism' or 'Orthodox.' Such inconsistencies proved especially glaring when recordings could not be associated with a single tradition, as with interfaith events or political protests.

How should interfaith events or political protests be classified in a digital sonic archive? There is no 'right' answer to the question. Tagging is an act of scholarly interpretation. It is the researcher's responsibility to determine which terms will be most analytically useful or illuminating. Scholars must rely on their own judgment to assess when denominational specificity is what matters or when a more generic term might suffice. They must decide for themselves how much to follow the self-identification of participants and how much to rely on other criteria. Our tagging process was also constrained by the collaborative nature of digital scholarship, by the technical specifications of digital databases, and by the anticipated needs and expectations of website users. For example, for search results to be meaningful, a dataset must be 'normalized,' usually by establishing a consistent set of keywords. Over the course of the project, we gradually moved away from openended questions toward a more standardized set of options from which students could choose. This brought real tradeoffs. As any critic of social scientific surveys would know, it is no simple thing to reduce the messy complexities of lived experience to a series of checkboxes.

One obvious problem had to do with groups that didn't 'fit.' For example, one student produced recordings of a community that identified itself as Black Jews. The student was unsure which box to select: Jewish? Black religion? Other? Would it make more sense to propose a new term, labeling them as they might have preferred but with a degree of

specificity not applied to other groups, or to 'squeeze' them into a more ill-fitting category in order to limit the number of search terms with which a user would have to contend? Who should decide, and according to what criteria? In another case, students had to decide how to tag recordings of anti-Muslim protests. On the one hand, Islamophobia is a significant feature of contemporary American Muslim experience, and it might make sense for users searching for 'Muslim' sounds to encounter this. On the other hand, American Muslims might rightly object to classifying the sounds of anti-Muslim bigotry as 'Islamic.' How ought the student proceed?

In each of these cases, students had to weigh and assess a number of competing factors, including their own intellectual and pedagogical objectives, the constraints of selected digital platforms, the needs and expectations of potential users, and their ethical responsibilities to the communities they were studying. They learned to approach tagging as a form of intellectual activity, which required research, reflection, interpretation, and judgment. There was no 'right' answer to these dilemmas. Yet, by thinking with and through them in a forum that ensured public accountability, our students grew more able to appreciate their roles and responsibilities as religious studies scholars.

Circulating beneath these definitional and classificatory concerns were broader questions about the ethics and politics of representation. How would we edit, organize, and disseminate the recordings we had produced? How would we represent the communities our students had studied in a publicly accessible online forum? Which digital tools and platforms would be most effective? In our classes, we surveyed a range of existing sites, taking note of which features we found most attractive or useful. We assessed and debated the relative merits of constructing digital gallery exhibits on particular sites or sounds versus creating an interactive soundmap, which would locate each of our recordings in geographic space. We discussed the difference between writing *about* sound and making an argument *through* sound, that is through creative acts of digital editing and composition. We reflected deliberately and self-consciously on the relationship between research and its representation.

These scholarly questions prompted both the instructors and the students to articulate and clarify our research goals and intellectual objectives. They were also ethical questions, which challenged us to define the nature of our responsibilities to the communities we study. And they were practical, technical, and aesthetic questions, which hinged on the varying capacities of different digital tools and plug-ins. Some tools were easy to use. Others were more difficult but better suited for working with sonic materials. Some promised a cleaner, more streamlined user experience, yet were more limited in functionality. As we debated these technical issues, we took into account the limited capabilities of our student designers and programmers. We also had to anticipate where users would interact with our site. Would they be sitting at their desks? In a car? On the go? What kind of device would they be using? How large would its screen be? How powerful its speakers? What kinds of accessibility issues might this pose? These were not the kinds of questions we were accustomed to asking when working on traditional scholarly writing projects. We also had to expand our pool of conversational partners, consulting with digital humanities librarians, GIS specialists, graphic designers, and web developers, not to mention members of the religious communities themselves. All of this transformed the ways that we and our students thought about research, illustrating its deeply collaborative character and compelling us to think through questions of method and representation in tandem.

Incorporating digital tools into the intellectual design of our courses required students to engage with primary research questions in the study of religion. The theoretical and methodological questions that we raised on the first day of class remained pressing – and never fully resolved – to the last day. Our courses, therefore, were as much about acquiring research skills as engaging with the experience of being a researcher. From the start, the students understood that they would be evaluated on the process of their research project as well as the final product. Unlike more traditional research projects, we asked students to provide some suggestions for how future researchers might add on and improve the research accomplished. Using digital tools encouraged students to work with each other and to see clearly how their scholarship contributed to a field of knowledge through participation in a broader collaborative project. The digital platform enabled us to present the students' research to a public audience and created the conditions for students to understand the critical and immediate stakes of their research choices. The potential that the research might be seen by someone other than the professor motivated students to take seriously the theoretical questions that had practical consequences for the overall quality of their work. Here, perhaps, lay the greatest value in engaging our students on this project. Together, we learned to perceive every choice we made, from where to record to what font size to deploy, as an interpretive question with real intellectual, ethical, and practical implications. It made us relentlessly self-reflexive and rigorously self-critical as students and scholars of religion. Our aim as course instructors was to engage our students in a research project that enabled them to contribute as scholars to the study of religion and to leave our classrooms eager to learn more. The use of digital tools helped us achieve that pedagogical goal.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributors

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