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Ancient Spaces in a Digital World

Marian Feldman, Professor, Art History and Near Eastern Studies

The issue

One of the more challenging aspects in developing a new course is choosing an appropriate educational technology to achieve my learning goals. The material in my course “Creating Sacred Space in the Ancient and Medieval World” lent itself to a visually focused approach to help students understand these sacred spaces and interpret the intents of their creators and builders. The course engaged students with undertaking their own research about ancient spaces and the culture that surrounds them by studying floor plans, technical drawings, photographs, and other relevant images. Ideally, the way to explore broad questions about what makes a place sacred and how it differs from other spaces is to include visual references to provide spatial context that can be aligned with material meaning.

My goals for the students’ learning outcomes were to be able to define a variety of different sacred spaces from the ancient world, to identify architectural, decorative and other physical features that created a sense of sacredness, and to articulate the unique ways in which each feature contributed to this sense. It was difficult to find a solution that not only met these course goals but also didn’t hinder the student’s ability to achieve them. Learning to use a new educational tool can be overwhelming and distracting for students as they attempt to engage with the course content to prepare and present final projects.

Why does it matter

Finding an appropriate educational technology application or tool for a course can be difficult but there are benefits to consider. For example, students may learn new skills applicable to their future careers, building their confidence, and potentially, their resumes as they enter the workforce. Furthermore, educational tools can be used by students to produce interesting and creative final projects such as professional presentations, development of a website, or a custom

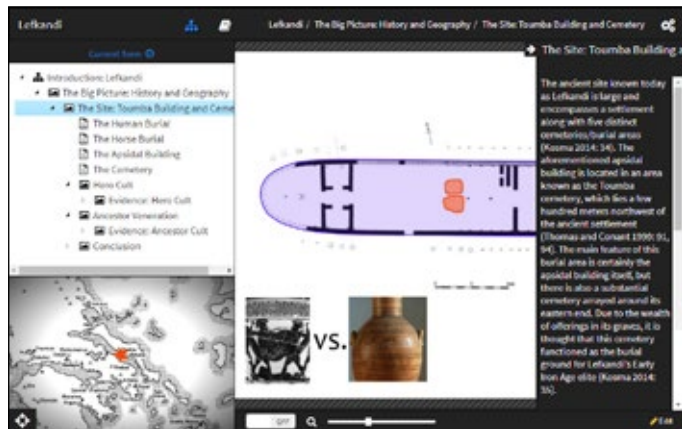
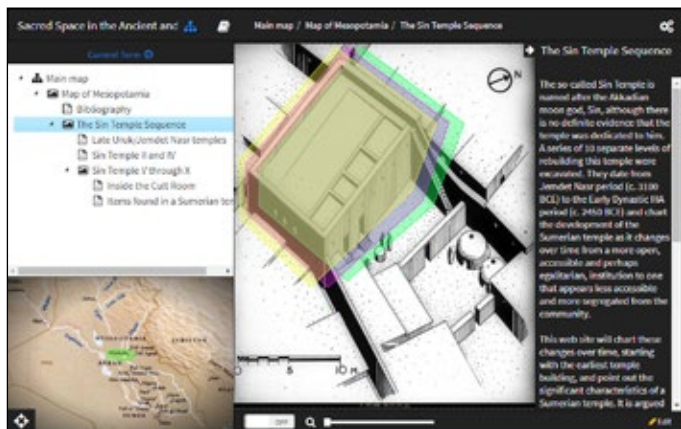


design solution. These alternatives to a research paper allow students to take creative ownership of the form or the structure of the project. Providing students with alternatives to a research paper can foster a richer and more memorable student learning experience.

Faculty solution

I wanted the students to directly express their research about these sacred spaces by creating a digital representation of one of the sacred spaces for their final project. They were asked to research a site, provide a written argument as to what made that space sacred, and support it with visual evidence. This necessitated exploration into a technical solution that would allow for a deeper understanding of these ancient sites and a means for students to present their research visually.

Initially, I thought the students could create a website for their final projects, so I began investigating platforms offered at Hopkins. After a consultation with the Center for Teaching Excellence and Innovation (CTEI), I discovered that they had developed an image annotation program called “Reveal” that would allow students to create contextual notes on images of sites they were researching. In order to better understand the program, my teaching assistant and I met with the CTEI staff. The details of the final project were adjusted to make sure the goals for the course would be met with students using Reveal.



Case study of the Sin Temple in ancient Mesopotamia and student project site in Reveal showing contrasting view points of a subject

In preparation for the course, a case study was developed for the students to give them an idea of how Reveal could be used. Floorplans depicting the sequence of reconstructions of an ancient Mesopotamian temple were selected and references were made as to where entryways and significant objects were located.

Class time was allotted to have the CTEI present a workshop on how to use Reveal. There was a follow up session to answer any questions that students had after using the application. We also had the students meet with Visual Resources Center staff to learn about how to use ArtStor to source their visual content.

To give the students guidance as the course progressed, we created project scaffolding—a series of incremental assignments and steps—to make the final project less daunting. Students first submitted a proposal in the form of a thesis statement for a sacred site that they wanted to research. After the project topic was accepted, they began their research and organized their content by using an outline format that served to inform site creation in Reveal. Students developed a bibliography and provided image cita-

tions for the resources used. Providing scaffolding for their learning ensured that before they moved on to more complicated tasks, they had the main foundations of the project in place.

Results

Overall, I felt the students achieved higher-order learning outcomes than they might have with a traditional research paper, and the course received positive evaluations. The majority of the projects met the learning objectives required for the assignment; there were several exemplary examples. One of the main aspects of the project evaluation was whether students had included a clear argument and conclusion—perhaps the biggest challenge that faced the students. Students did find the scaffolding exercises, particularly the outline, to be helpful in developing their arguments.

When it came to grading, both my teaching assistant and I benefited from using a grading rubric I created for us to follow. This aligned our thinking and normalized our grading across the student projects. This is particularly important with projects that have a creative or expressive

form as it helps to reduce bias and stick with evaluating performance.

Another factor that eased the grading process was how Reveal itself is built. The application doesn't allow for users to change the layout or styling as building a website would have. Because the students didn't have to select from an overwhelming number of optional features, they were able to focus on organizing their content, and the elements we were looking to grade were in a consistent form. Students came to realize that in the end, their viewers would have control over how to navigate through a site and discover connections and relationships on their own terms. This, and Reveal's implicit hierarchical content display, pushed students to think about organizing their content in a manner that would allow for exploration, whether governed by topics, categories, physical space, or otherwise.

Other thoughts

When looking into educational tools to use in a course, it is important to consider the big factor for both the students and the instructor. For the students, the time investment in learning to use the tool should be weighed carefully against the potential for learning gains. Time should be factored into the syllabus to provide appropriate training and support.

Today, humanities students need to be digitally literate in preparation for their post-academic life. Understanding how to work with images, knowing some basics about intellectual property law, learning to source and cite visual materials are important skills for 21st century career. Next time I teach this course I will consider inviting staff to present on these concepts as a way to add more skills-based training to the course.

Additional resources

- Reveal, image annotation tool: <https://cteijhu.edu/tools-and-tech/reveal>

Author's background



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Marian Feldman teaches the art and archaeology of ancient Mesopotamia, the Near East, and eastern Mediterranean from approximately 3500 BCE to 500 BCE. Her classes stress the social context of ancient art and the arts' contribution to our knowledge about ancient civilizations.