Students explain their chess project to assistant professor David Sterling Brown. (Photo: Aengus Anderson/University Libraries)

Digital Shakespeare: New Course Brings Old Works Alive

Students in "Diversifying Shakespeare: Engaging Students Beyond Boundaries" worked with English professors and librarians to develop digital teaching tools that explored the social construction of identity in Shakespeare's work.

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When undergraduate students from across Arizona gathered recently at Mesa Community College to present projects on Shakespeare, the collaboration crossed disciplinary boundaries and included scholars from English, theater, history, digital humanities, cultural studies, science and linguistics.

The one commonality of the projects: using technology to explore diversity in Shakespeare.

The conference, "Diversifying Shakespeare: Engaging Students Beyond Boundaries," was funded by a National Endowment for the Humanities-sponsored grant from the Folger Institute at the Folger Shakespeare Library. University of Arizona faculty members **David Sterling Brown**, **Meg Lota Brown** and **Kyle DiRoberto** applied for the grant after the UA had displayed Shakespeare's First Folio in 2016.

The grant included the opportunity for UA students to contribute their projects to the Folger Shakespeare Library's online suite of shared teaching tools and digital assignments, which will be freely available on the Folger website for other college teachers worldwide.

The new UA undergraduate course "ENGL-310: Diversifying Shakespeare: Engaging Students Beyond Boundaries" — supported by a 100% Engagement grant — was offered in the spring semester in preparation for the conference. Students collaborated with one another to develop digital teaching tools.

David Sterling Brown, Meg Lota Brown and DiRoberto led the course with UA librarians **Jennifer Nichols**, **Anthony Sanchez** and **Niamh Wallace**.

Students in the course read Shakespeare's "Titus Andronicus" and "The Merchant of Venice," drawing on concepts articulated in W.E.B. Du Bois' "The Souls of Black Folk" and Gloria E. Anzaldúa's "Borderlands/La Frontera."

"We wanted students to engage with a variety of texts and a variety of historical periods, including our own, to analyze the social construction of identity," said Meg Lota Brown, an English professor and director of the UA Graduate Center.

By helping the students develop critical thinking related to the challenges and advantages of diversity, DiRoberto, program director of English at UA South, also hopes the students will become more actively engaged with these issues in the community.

Double-consciousness was one theory examined in the class.

"Double-consciousness is this two-ness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others," said David Sterling Brown, assistant professor of early modern English literature, who often teaches Shakespeare alongside African-American literature. "In Du Bois' book, he discusses the African-American experience and the challenge of trying to reconcile two distinct identities — American and Negro."

The class was taught in a traditional classroom space in the Integrated Learning Center early in the semester and then moved to the iSpace, a collaborative space in the Science-Engineering Library.

Nichols, a digital scholarship librarian who co-directs the iSpace with Anthony Sanchez, said, "Our role is to support faculty research and instruction around digital scholarship and digital humanities. This is a classic opportunity to work with faculty who have not done digital humanities projects."

Through a program called TouchCast, the students learned to imbed multiple digital tools — textual analysis, family trees, maps, websites, social media and virtual reality — into videos to create an interactive experience.

"As a computer science major, I appreciate that there is a class that bridges technology and literature and brings us both worlds," said **Maxwell Faridian**, a computer science major. "We had students from all different kinds of majors in this class and it is nice to have those interactions."

Allison McNally, studying business and information science, said she had not taken a Shakespeare class previously.

"The opportunity to explore the plays through digital humanities is really cool. My group focused on the different borders the characters in the play face, including economic, gender and race," McNally said.

The linguistic analysis tools were particularly useful for a group looking at representations of social violence, misrepresentation and silencing, DiRoberto said.

Wallace, an assistant librarian, explained text mining as similar to distance reading.

"You are looking at a larger body of text with an analytical and critical lens," Wallace said. The activity allows the researcher to look at themes and the relationship between characters.

Having studied Shakespeare since his freshman year, **Yori Johnson**, who is studying English and Africana studies, said he enjoyed getting creative with the material. His team created a chess game based on "Titus Andronicus" and also set up social media pages to add quotes and textual analysis.

David Sterling Brown explained that the chess game illuminated the racial and class elements of the play by showing the conflict between the Roman and Goth characters as well as one "outlier character" of Moorish descent. The team represented the two factions through the different-colored chess pieces and had to figure out an alternative way to represent Aaron, the Moor.

"Their conclusion was that Aaron (the black character) is in the wrong game, so to speak, so we have to figure out how to incorporate him," David Sterling Brown said. "That is what Shakespeare does in very interesting ways to challenge and affirm stereotypes of black figures."

Brown added that the game was a clever way to "display the limited options available to people who are subject to various constructions of identity. If the rules of the game — the unspoken rules that we are dealt relating to identity — limit those moves, the game will manifest that fact."

The three instructors seemed to enjoy working with the UA librarians.

"I think the librarians are awesome. They pushed me out of my comfort zone," said David Sterling Brown, before joking: "In previous classes, I thought I was being technologically savvy by showing a film clip."

Said Meg Lota Brown: "The librarians were equal partners in the learning that took place. I learned from them myself."

EXTRA INFO

Click **here** (https://vimeo.com/217928753) to watch a video about the "Diversifying Shakespeare" project.

(https://cdn.uanews.arizona.edu/s3fs-public/styles/blog_image_large_600px_w/public/story-images/Shakespeare 8_1.jpg?HpYI_g0hwv6PUt8c7kgnsUQatNAVrBQg=&itok=tVnCusxU)

Anthony Sanchez, an assistant librarian with University Libraries, co-directs the iSpace with Jennifer Nichols. Here he shows a student how to use the virtual reality equipment. "It's been a fun and interesting course," Sanchez says. "It is one way to have more interactivity and to see where the students' creativity can take them." (Photo: Aengus Anderson/University Libraries)

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