Panel: Pedagogy and Digital Editions
MLA Committee: Committee on Scholarly Editions
Chair: Jesús Rodríguez-Velasco

8:30-9:45am Saturday 10 January 2015
Room 215, VCC West

Textual Scholarship as Information Literacy: A *Frankenstein* Case Study

Julia Bninski
Loyola University Chicago
jbninski@luc.edu

ABSTRACT

Among the pedagogical advantages of using digital editions is the ease with which students, using tools like Juxta, can compare textual variants. Although textual scholarship is not necessarily common in general education classes, this paper will argue that foundational literature courses aimed at non-majors can benefit from using digital editions to investigate textual variants. In particular, this paper will focus on the ways in which instructors can use digital editions to enhance information literacy by raising questions about where texts come from and why they vary.

As evidence, this paper will report on the results of assigning Stuart Curran's digital edition of *Frankenstein* to sixty students enrolled in two sections of a general education course during Spring 2014. Published on *Romantic Circles* in 2009, Curran's edition includes both Shelley's original 1818 text and her revised 1831 text. Working collaboratively, student teams each chose a single chapter and performed a close reading of the 1818 and 1831 texts. In addition to introducing students to questions of information literacy, authorial intention, and textual transmission, this assignment has the benefit of producing student papers that take a fresh approach to a frequently assigned text.

Why is comparing textual variants a useful activity for gen ed classes?

Digital editions make it easy to compare textual variants using free tools like Juxta from NINES. But simply because a tool exists doesn't mean that there is a pedagogically sound reason to use it. So, in a general education literature course, why would we want to use digital tools to compare textual variants?

I'm going to answer this question in general terms, then look at a case study from a 100-level literature class (Spring 2014 / 2 sections / 57 students total) where we read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a novel that exists in two significantly different editions:
 – the original 1818 text
 – and the revised, expanded 1831 text.

**How does textual scholarship promote information literacy
and why is information literacy an appropriate goal for a gen ed literature class?**

Information literacy broadly defined:

Digital natives don't necessarily have information literacy or digital literacy: "[S]tudents mistake the ease with which they can recover information online with proficiency in evaluating what is relevant, how to find it, and where it belongs in broader informational contexts" (Mussell 161).
 – Ex: Google results for "*Frankenstein* free online text" turn up many texts that don't indicate whether they are based on the 1818 or the 1831 edition.
Information literacy means critical thinking, not just basic research. It's evaluating and contextualizing texts, not just finding them.

Information literacy defined in more discipline-specific terms:

In order to analyze and evaluate sources you need to know:
 – What am I actually looking at?
 – Where did it come from?
 – What agents were involved in creating and publishing it? (And what were their goals?)
In short: What was the copy text and how can I find out?

Outside audiences are likely to understand that information literacy is a valuable, transferable skill. Information literacy also connects to two issues that I want students in a literature class to understand:
 1) Texts are not totally stable.
 2) Textual production is more collaborative than we often realize.

Case Study

<u>Scaffolding</u>

Students had already been introduced to the idea that "*Frankenstein*" doesn't refer to a single, stable object: at the beginning of the semester, we discussed the fact that they needed to buy or access the 1818 text, not the longer 1831 text.

During lecture, I used the Shelley-Godwin Archive to display Mary Shelley's MS and Percy Shelley's contributions. The MS visually reinforces the idea that texts aren't stable and that authorship may be more collaborative than we often realize. Any printed text reflects decisions made by the author (and by other agents, such as editors, publishers, even friends or family members) at a particular moment in time.

<u>The Assignment</u>

Working collaboratively, student teams each chose a single chapter and performed a close reading of the differences between the 1818 and 1831 texts. The assignment asked them to explain whether/how the changes affected the book's overall meaning or themes. They reported on their findings in a short (750-1000 word) paper and an oral presentation.

<u>Results</u>

What kinds of thesis statements did students create?

1) claims about differences in characterization
2) claims connecting differences (including characterization) to overall themes (family, education, free will vs. destiny, revenge, etc.)

Examples:

- "The changes from the 1818 edition to the 1831 edition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* are remarkably noticeable give that such a small amounts of information has been added, edited, and removed. . . . Mary Shelley's final intention for the novel in the 1831 edition changed Victor's view of science from eager to slightly distressed, while his relationship to Elizabeth is more romantic, and Henry Clerval is characterized as being more independent, in the whole she creates a stronger interplay of the idea of destiny and free will that drives the plot to its final conclusion."

- "In the 1818 version of Volume 1 Chapter 7, Victor is initially characterized as a bystander lacking initiative to act whereas the 1831 version characterizes him as a self-centered and afflicted man harboring intense guilt. Shelley conveys this attitude of guilt through the use of punctuation, the characterization of Justine, foreshadowing, and other literary devices."

- "Volume 2, Chapter 9 initially portrays the importance of family, but Mary Shelley's 1831 revision ignores this aspect, depicting Victor and the Creature as more individualistic. This

can be seen through the relationship between Victor and his family, the relationship between Victor and the Creature, and through punctuation changes."

What kinds of evidence did students use?

Since so little changes in plot terms, students couldn't fill up the paper with summary under the mistaken impression that summary and analysis are the same thing.

They identified passages that were added, revised, or deleted in 1831. Focusing on these passages, they primarily analyzed diction and punctuation changes.

Students also noted that more foreshadowing was added in 1831. They noted when allusions to other texts (Dante's *Inferno*) were added or deleted. A particularly attentive group noticed an instance where Shelley removed a direct address to Walton/the reader (Shelley 123). Thus, they argued, the 1818 edition reminds you of the frame narrative while the 1831 edition keeps you immersed in Victor's story-telling.

What worked:

Although they didn't always prove their claims successfully, every group came up with a reasonably concrete and thoughtful claim (not a vague or predictable claim).

After comparing textual variants, students did seem to appreciate that "*Frankenstein*" does not refer to a single, stable text.

What I would improve:

I would explicitly connect this assignment to MLA citation guidelines: since texts aren't stable and since multiple agents are involved in creating them, we need accurate citation that documents which text we used and who created it.

Benefits:

I've already mentioned that comparing *Frankenstein*'s two editions promotes information literacy and leads to papers that aren't just summary.

Especially with such a frequently-taught text where there are interpretations all over the internet, it's enjoyable to read papers that take a fresher approach. Asking students to compare textual variants also allows you to craft an assignment that requires students to focus on close reading and to perform more original analysis. Students cannot simply go with a safe topic like "*Frankenstein* shows the danger of science without morality."

How generalizable is this assignment and its objectives?

Obviously, asking students to compare textual variants is most useful when you are teaching a text that exists in notably different editions. You could also compare a manuscript to a published text, or compare different translations of the same work. For a more advanced class, you might ask students to create the texts that they will compare using Juxta.

More broadly, one of the major differences between print and digital texts is that it's possible to *process* digital texts. Using Juxta to compare textual variants is just one way that we can process a digital text. A question that I hope we'll address in discussion is this: How can we incorporate text processing tools into assignments in ways that enhance literary analysis skills by asking students to pay close attention to language and form?

In conclusion, you don't have to specialize in textual studies or digital humanities to make sound pedagogical use of digital editions. Anyone who teaches literature is able to think about
a) What editions we assign and why.
b) How digital tools can enable genuine learning.

WORKS CITED

Mussell, James. *The Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age*. New York: Palgrave
     Macmillan, 2012. Print.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*. Ed. Marilyn Butler. New York: Oxford UP, 2008.
     Print.

Textual Scholarship as Information Literacy: A *Frankenstein* Case Study

Julia Bninski (jbninski@luc.edu)

Useful Links:

The Shelley-Godwin Archive http://shelleygodwinarchive.org/

Stuart Curran's digital edition of *Frankenstein* at Romantic Circles
http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/frankenstein

Juxta Commons comparison of the 1818 and 1831 texts (prepared by Dana Wheeles, using Curran's edition) http://juxtacommons.org/shares/Nme50n

---

Frankenstein Paper Assignment

Your team has chosen a chapter from *Frankenstein*. Working together, identify and analyze textual differences between the 1818 and 1831 editions of your chapter.

Write a paper comparing and contrasting the 1818 and 1831 editions. Essentially, you will perform a close reading of these textual differences, showing how they change the chapter's meaning and its relation to *Frankenstein* as a whole. You may find that you don't have time or space to discuss all of the differences. In that case, focus on the changes that seem most important, and be sure to explain *why* they are so important.

Write a 750-1000 word paper that meets the following requirements:

1. Identify *how the 1818 and 1831 editions use language differently*. In other words, identify any stylistic differences in addition to any changes in plot. Be specific about the details—the exact words, images, uses of figurative language, rhetorical strategies, tone, etc.—that seem most important to you.

2. Identify *how these differences contribute to the chapter's meaning, and whether/how they alter the chapter's conceptual relationship to the work as a whole*. Be as clear as you can about what you think the textual differences say or suggest about *Frankenstein*'s larger themes.

3. The paper must have a *thesis statement* that makes an analytical claim about the effect or meaning of the textual differences.

    o Ex: "The most significant textual change in Volume 1, Chapter 2 is _____ because it alters Victor's relationship to _____."

    o Ex: "Volume 2, Chapter 8 initially characterizes the monster as _____, but Mary Shelley's 1831 revisions depict him as more _____."

4. Use quotations to support your claim and develop your analysis. Whenever you include a quotation, be sure to comment on it rather than plunking it into the paper without explanation. Note that this paper asks you to analyze, not summarize.

5. Include a *final paragraph detailing each team member's contribution to the paper*. Please note if any team members are working only on the presentation.

6. Provide correct in-text citation and a "Works Cited" following MLA guidelines. MLA guidelines are available online at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/.