I teach at a small liberal arts college 35 miles south of Pittsburgh with a total enrollment of 1300 to 1400 students. Our digital humanities program is small—about one course a term. Our humanities students are scared of computer stuff so enrollments are small in that one course. It’s the Venn diagram problem:

Not too many of my colleagues know much about computer technologies in the humanities. I knew a bit but had never taught a DH course. Even I was intimidated.

What to do?

Well, pool resources and develop a team-taught course with lots of small assignments that don’t look too threatening to either faculty or student.

Five of us got an internal summer grant funded by one of our trustees to develop some new curricular ideas.¹ I’ve been chatting about DH for some time to our Dean of Academic Affairs and, lo and behold, DH was one of the “sample” curricular ideas on the call for grant-

¹ The team of five consisted of Christy Shaughnessy, HJ Manzari, and Susan Vdovichenko (all from Modern Languages); Charles Hannon (Computer and Information Science); and Linda Troost (English).
proposal submissions. I sent out a call for interested faculty to join me and got four replies. We developed a plan and sent in our proposal. We won.

We worked on our own through the summer, using the $2000 we each received from W&J trustee Richard T. Clark to (a) attend DH workshops in places like the University of Victoria or (b) study instead of teach summer school. Thanks to the grant, our summer of study and an academic year of thinking allowed us improve our knowledge and skills so we could offer an innovative course centered on the use of digital tools to analyze, archive, curate, and present historical, cultural, and creative materials related to issues of identity and ethnicity.

However, after preregistration ended, hardly any students had signed up for our wonderful course. Thanks to the new chair of the English department, who was in charge of generating incoming-student course schedules over the summer, we ended up with ten students, seven of them first-semester freshmen who didn’t know how they ended up there. But they proved game for the challenge.

What did this course, ENG 255-01, consist of? Five of us tag-team teaching an “umbrella” course called *Identity, Ethnicity, and the Digital Humanities*. Coming from different disciplines—English, Computer and Information Science, Russian, and Spanish—we all shared professional training in literary studies, a desire to promulgate digital humanities methodologies, and a wish to teach our students about diversity, one of the College’s general education goals. Well, there was some strategy involved with the last—a D course was bound to lure in students looking to satisfy graduation requirements. And framing it as a text-centered course based in the English department instead of as a computer-science course helped.

Each of us taught a two-week unit that connected to scholarly work we were currently doing and that centered on a text and a digital tool. That way, we didn’t each need to learn a whole lot of technical stuff. I was the instructor of record, attended nearly all the classes, taught two units, supervised the final projects, and handled paperwork/reporting and syllabus design. The other four taught their units as overloads (we did get generous stipends, after all), coming in to teach and grade, then vanishing.

There was reading—it was an English course, after all—and a lot of little projects and papers. Students analyzed depictions of race, identity, and ethnicity in a variety of literary and
historical materials. I taught the story of Inkle and Yarico, made famous by Richard Steele and turned into a musical by George Colman and Samuel Arnold in 1787. Christy Shaughnessy focused on Ken Burns’s PBS documentary about early twentieth-century African American heavyweight champion Jack Jackson; HJ Manzari taught Brown, a memoir by Richard Rodriguez. Susan Vdovichenko guided us through current events in Crimea, language issues, and the politics of maps. Charles Hannon, a computer and information science professor with a PhD in English, taught everyone Faulkner’s As I Lay Dying.

Students did digital assignments, often accompanied by a traditional analytical paper. They found archival materials in electronic databases and online. They created data visualizations and maps. They made videos and wrote blogs. They produced timelines. Every two-week unit ended with short student presentations focused on analysis of the text and what digital work had uncovered about it.

Let me show you some samples of what they did [SLIDE SHOW].

1. They mined historical American newspaper databases, armed with the Windows Snipping Tool, for news stories and cartoons of Joe Jackson, the results analyzed in WordPress blogs. Some students made Voyant word clouds to see patterns in news accounts over time.

2. They mined the Burney newspapers, HathiTrust, and the British Museum image database looking for material about Inkle and Yarico and also learning about image mining, Creative Commons licenses, and fair use. These results were also written up as WordPress blogs.

3. They made timelines (a little interlude project), working with one of three online programs: TimeGlider, Timeline JS, and When in Time. This was a big hit.

4. They corrected OCR for a small historic document in ECCO using Typewright—it was at ASECS last spring that I took Laura Mandell’s pre-convention workshop; I used what I learned in that workshop in ENG 255-01.

5. They mapped something of interest to them—languages in Ukraine and Russia, statistical information about gender inequality, all sorts of things—using one of several online programs.
6. They interviewed Latino/Latina students on campus and made videos for the Department of Modern Languages archive of interviews.

7. The most challenging project was Tableau-generated data visualizations of speech patterns and power dynamics in Faulkner. The professor for that unit had spent part of his sabbatical working on Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) methods developed by James Pennebaker and shared his prepared data on the novel for students to use in charts that revealed such things as relative power dynamics, “clout,” and “authenticity.”

The course concluded with each student’s developing a small project that used DH tools and addressed identity or ethnicity.

An unlooked-for bonus was student self-discovery—of personal identity and cultural background. At the start of the course, the students all self-identified as “just plain Americans”; after a term of close study of historic and literary material, they came to realize the complexity of their own backgrounds and what being “American” really meant, something to which they had given very little thought. This had not been an objective of the course, but it emerged on its own. Many students went home at Thanksgiving and asked family about traditions and national origin. They quizzed their Serbian grandparents, Korean uncles, and French-speaking mothers.

The course helped each student develop “self-awareness” and an ability to see their “place in larger world,” to quote from the Washington & Jefferson College Outcomes. Amongst themselves in the class, they learned how to talk about diversity and to recognize how diverse it could be. Although small in scale, the course was a success: not too threatening, grounded in a traditional subject with enough repetition of types of assignments to allow for some proficiency, allowing each student a fair amount of independence, and providing a showcase for both analysis and creativity. The next time we teach it, I bet we don’t have as much trouble finding students.

For a copy of the syllabus for ENG 255-01 or the PowerPoint presentation that accompanied this roundtable talk, email LTroost at washjeff.edu.