

# Exploring New Worlds in Old Texts: Text Encoding Projects for the Undergraduate Study of Spanish American Colonial Literature

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Teaching Spanish colonial literature to undergraduate students is a difficult pedagogical task, because students in that level don't have an extensive knowledge of the language of the times or the books' historical context. Indeed, graduate classes and even scholars writing in the field rarely grapple with the early modern editions themselves, because of their accessibility and because they can be so difficult to penetrate. A scholarly collection of essays by Danny Anderson and Jill S. Kuhnheim, that discusses strategies for teaching this material, encourages an approach to these texts based on cultural theory and literary criticism rather than on a close examination of the texts themselves. At Wheaton College (Norton, MA), on the contrary, we have spent the last two years experimenting with a different approach: students' direct involvement with a digital portion of a colonial text (supported by digital cartographic evidence from the period, and mediated by the faculty's suggestions) enhances their comprehension and interest for the actual original book.

In three literature classes undergraduate students have contributed to the creation of a digital critical edition of a 16th century Spanish rare book: *Libro de los Infortunios y Naufragios* (*Book of the Misfortunes and Shipwrecks*) by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, partially published in Seville in 1535, as part of the *La Historia General de las Indias* (*General History of the West Indies*). To date Fernandez de Oviedo's shipwreck narrative has received only scant scholarly attention by literary critics because

of the rarity of the book and accessibility to the XVI century printed edition (Kohut).

The class goal is to produce a digital edition of Fernandez de Oviedo's book. The process comprises a variety of steps, aimed to direct students' attention to the texts themselves, their structure, the meaning of words and phrases, and even of individual letters. Students first learn to use accurate transcription techniques and electronic textual editing practices, and then move on to the text encoding based on an XML encoding scheme developed by the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI). We have found that using the TEI encoding is an effective pedagogical tool because, as Allen Renear notes in a article, the standard can "improve our ability to describe textual features.... The TEI Guidelines represent an elucidation of current practices, methods, and concepts that open the way to new methods of analysis, new understandings, and new possibilities for representation and communication" (235).

The TEI encoding project functions as a pedagogical tool to study an Early Modern Spanish text; it helps students become more knowledgeable regarding the primary text and the context in which it was written. By using TEI students focus their attention on three main levels: linguistic, geographical and historical. While working directly with a text with the purpose of encoding one of its portions, students have a chance to learn across multiple disciplines, e.g. learning about the ancient Spanish denomination of a place, and creating a link to its location on a map of the times.

The encoding projects are divided into several stages. First, students use text editing software to create a transcription from digital images of original print editions – a process that involves deciphering difficult 16th century typography and finding codes to represent the many characters that are no longer used in contemporary Spanish. After completing the transcription, the students employ a rigorous, descriptive "tagging" process, using the TEI XML encoding scheme. They begin by marking the structural parts of the text – where each chapter begins and ends, each section heading, each paragraph, and so on. They then use TEI encoding to tag historical people names, places, and unfamiliar or archaic vocabulary in the text. And as a final stage of the project, the students perform appropriate research about their texts, and using TEI, define all of the tagged people, places, and vocabulary – essentially providing electronic footnotes to the digital editions of the text. During this stage of the project, students also work with scans of original maps from the period – locating on the maps many places they have tagged, and linking segments of text in their documents to the scans.

This process presents many pedagogical advantages. Students are extremely motivated by projects like this: they work so closely with the text and end up creating their own annotated edition, thus feeling a sense of ownership of the documents. Many students are excited that this project reaches beyond

typical Humanities class work and that they see the results of their hard work very quickly published on the World Wide Web. The students' digital editions of the texts also help preserve and eventually widen the distribution of out of print texts. And finally, this project introduces an academic rigor in studying this literature, which shows in the accuracy taken to encode and validate the text encoding. Within the last few years, Wheaton has been instituting a new curriculum that emphasizes that students should gain a breadth and depth of knowledge through their course work. The process of creating a digital edition of texts like these ensures that students have an in depth experience with a text unlike most other experiences they have had in the humanities. This approach to a text encourages them to apply a systematic, almost scientific approach to humanities scholarship. This work, therefore, is well in line with the goals of many of digital humanities scholarship. A goal, which Susan Hockey expressed in a comprehensive article about the history of the Digital Humanities: "to bring the rigor and systematic unambiguous procedural methodologies characteristic of the sciences to address problems within the humanities that had hitherto been most often treated in a serendipitous fashion" (3).

Our experience teaching with TEI at Wheaton has been very positive: students learn to understand and appreciate the original rare book, only once they have had their experience with creating the digitally enhanced version of it. At that point they're ready to visit a prestigious library like the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, and look at the book and at the maps of the period. Undergraduates benefit from the text encoding experience in many ways: better understanding of the topic of study, better understanding of the foreign language, and interest, or at least curiosity, for the rare book itself. Assessment on student learning has been very positive: students retain a lot more than with traditional teaching, and can sometimes also spot irregularities and even fake news in the texts they study. The load on the faculty member and on the library liaison is very high, but it pays off with the students' satisfaction.

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