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"EEBO-Driven": Ten Years of Test-Driving

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In this paper I will review some opportunities EEBO-TCP has opened for my undergraduate students and myself through a selection of assignments and courses; but before concluding, I will reflect generally on how EEBO-TCP has worked best for me in the classroom, and how actual and perceived shortcomings might best be addressed in order to ensure the ongoing development of and academic support for EEBO-TCP as a pivotal resource in early modern cultural studies.

Before I continue, I should clarify that I would not have had the gumption to offer *any* of the assignments or courses that I describe below without the TCP aspect of EEBO, since even some graduate students arrive in my classes remarkably unversed in encounters with black-letter text, among other obsolete and challenging textual conventions of the period. Without transcriptions, most of my students probably could not benefit from EEBO, and even with a selected cache of transcriptions, challenges remain, as I will show and in some cases attempt to address below.

Case 1: "Spenser and the Age of Elizabeth"

In this course, I have offered several variations on an assignment relying primarily on EEBO. All variations have been assigned as early as possible in the term, and I demonstrate the database on the first or second day of class, so that students can start working with it immediately. I have found myself narrowing the requirements of the assignment each time I offer the course, because experience suggests that the results generated by more open-ended questions are never sufficiently focused for students to be able to sift through in order to present with precision. In the first year, I offered these instructions:

> Select a year from the Age of Elizabeth; consult the EEBO texts itemized for that year. Develop a rational, accurate, and insightful way of analyzing the print culture of the Age of Elizabeth by surveying the print output from that year. You will, of course, not be able to read all of the items available; you will need to read selectively and consultatively. You are also welcome to read *about* certain texts by looking them up in reference sources when helpful. Your job is to discover and to present interesting and meaningful findings about and patterns in the year you have selected.

Students summarized their findings and presented them aloud, briefly but formally, in order to share the widest variety of the aspects of Elizabethan textual culture. The prompting question was purposefully open-ended in order to encourage students to spend time wading around in the search results, in the hope that they would thereby become familiar with some of the breadth of that culture, and also perhaps allow themselves the chance to make the kind of serendipitous discovery that EEBO-TCP enables. But this approach to surveying unfamiliar textual culture by means of an unfamiliar resource turned out to be too much for most students; what they presented tended to be as diffuse

as their findings, although some coped by turning successfully to novel modes (for students of the humanities, anyways) of presentation, such as the charts and graphs that have generated interesting findings, and controversies, in the work of Franco Moretti and other proponents of what has been provocatively called "distant reading."[1]

In a refined version of the assignment, I asked students to write an essay instead, since I thought more space might let them clarify the significance of their findings. I once again had all survey one year's worth of results in EEBO, but then had each

> select 3 texts from that year for closer examination and research. Take a good close look at the texts, reading and interpreting relevant portions; then see what more you can learn from secondary sources. Please note that it might be more advantageous to choose more obscure rather than very well-known texts. Also, if you select very large texts, you are of course not expected to read them in full—make judicious selections. Your job is to discover and present interesting and meaningful findings about the nature of print culture in the period. Your paper must consist of organized prose that demonstrates an understanding of the nature of all three texts and persuasively advances an argument for using them as lenses into the Age of Elizabeth or some aspect of it.

I offered them some guidance on factors to consider when generating their analysis:

- What genres are represented, predominantly? What genres are unexpectedly absent?
- Are any recognizable authors represented? Are most authors contemporary? Are most authors English?
- What topics recur? What seems to be of interest in the period?

I also encouraged them to devise more innovative variables to consider in shaping their analysis. The results here were better, perhaps because the demand was for a more conventional essay; but the results were also harder to share in the classroom, which was my primary aim: to expose students to a diversity of cross-sections of the textual environment of the Elizabethan age at the outset of their encounter with it.

With this aim in mind, most recently I offered this assignment on the very first day of class, with results to be presented in an informal, roundtable discussion only one week later. This time, these were the instructions:

> This assignment ensures that you can operate, with insight, one of the unique resources available for reading and researching the Age of Elizabeth. Search EEBO for a single item from the Age of Elizabeth that provides you with a meaningful way of interpreting a salient aspect of this somewhat alien textual culture. The item might be something you find representative (but of what? Use your judgment to make a good decision) or something you find odd, but it must be, like your treatment of it, informative about something beyond itself. Your primary aim is to assist yourself and your peers by immersing yourself in and finding valid ways to interpret these cultural remains.

[1] See, for instance, Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London and New York: Verso, 2005).

This was by far the most successful version of the assignment, since each informal presentation would spur another student to volunteer a related finding; as a result, a tentative sense of some larger cultural patterns and habits began to build. The next time I offer the assignment, I intend to have students to post their findings in an online forum, too, not only to let each of them benefit from each other's findings, but to permit me to include this material on the final examination.[2]

Although this latest version of the assignment achieved its goals, I continued to find, as I always have in my incorporation of EEBO-TCP in my pedagogy, that many students are unexpectedly intimidated by the idea of the database itself. It remains surprising to me that students considerably younger than me, who have lived all their lives in conjunction with a digital environment, are unable to operate reasonably basic search engines and access the holdings of fairly user-friendly databases; but I have recently learned, perhaps, something of the reason why. Many of my students have suggested that in their secondary schools, the policy in classes where students must produce research papers is a complete ban on digital resources. Rather than asking students to assess the credibility of such sources, some teachers seem to prefer to deny their access altogether. I suspect that the success of EEBO-TCP in the undergraduate classroom might skyrocket if secondary-school students, and their teachers, were provided with access and with training in the nature and value of such sources.

Case 2: "Evolutions in Early English Print: The First Century"

My next example of the integration of EEBO-TCP into my pedagogy comes from a fourth-year seminar for Honours students that simply could not exist without the resource in question. The course lets students observe evolutions in English print culture over its first hundred years, and to focus on significant selected works as discovered, defined, and defended by individual class members. There is no textbook; instead, we make intensive use of EEBO-TCP. Owing to our dependence on the database, class members must have regular access to a high-speed internet connection. While this resource is available on campus, I am aware that those with access to a fast connection at home are advantaged over those without, as are those privileged to transport their preparation for class on a portable computer (rather than in bulky and costly print-outs), which they can then continue to use in class through the wireless connection. The inequities that result from depending on digital resources to which students have variable access leaves me with ongoing qualms about a course I otherwise love for its ability to encourage experimental, exuberant work from often jaded students as they approach graduation.

The class proceeds through a century's worth of results in EEBO by capturing core samples of a single year from each decade, starting in 1473, the earliest date

[2] I was able to build on student work, but only in a very general way, as the basis for a final examination question as a result of the first version of this assignment; this was the question on the examination script: "One student in this class found in EEBO some illustrated poems on the subject of disfigured newborns, or what were then called 'monstrous births.' Some such poems attributed the disfigurement to the vice of the English people. The OED tells us that the word for 'monster' comes from the Latin *monere*, which means 'to warn.' Discuss related ideas of 'monstrousness' in relation to one or more characters from *The Faerie Queene*." Posting the details of their work online would let me refer in more detail to their assignments in my examination questions; knowing that I might do so would encourage students to read each other's work with greater care.

represented in the database. The next week, we treat 1483, and so on, decade by decade. After some introductory classes incorporating lectures on the database and the period, I let individual students run portions of each class. They first provide context by situating their year in some contemporary events or issues pertinent to print culture, in order to anchor what might otherwise become a relatively unhistoricized discussion. The student leaders then survey the works for the year that are accessible through EEBO and bring out any patterns or oddities. Finally, they focus on a single text (or meaningful portions of it), explain its significance, and discuss how it might fit usefully into a larger research project. Often, with these "show and tell" texts, the presenters further isolate a passage to read closely and edit collaboratively, an exercise that grounds discussions otherwise apt to drift away from the mucky material of the texts themselves. The transcriptions make it easy to search for a portion of a text under discussion and paste it elsewhere so that we can work with both the photographic images and online secondary sources to check and annotate the transcription.

In the final assignment for this course, I offer alternatives to a conventional research essay: students have the option to produce a brief but accurate and thoroughly annotated edition of one of the EEBO texts or a reasonable portion thereof. The selected text must not be readily available in a modern edition. Another option is for students to produce a brief anthology of at least five EEBO works (or, again, selections from them), either taken from a single year and/or on a single theme, with a prefatory essay that rationalizes the project. Among the students who choose these options, they are almost universally attracted to building on the transcriptions offered in EEBO-TCP, both because they are averse to engaging with black-letter text and because they rapidly become familiar with the shortcomings of the transcriptions and the ways in which careful editing and annotation can improve the representation of the original. Oddly, in this case, the shortcomings of this scholarly resource, in conjunction with its strengths, are what lead students to feel they can rely on it as the basis of their own original work; if the texts in EEBO-TCP were, themselves, fully-fledged scholarly editions, my students would feel much less empowered to make the interventions that they do.

It is this sense of scholarly work and historical study as open procedures—always fluid, always revising and building on what came before—that this course seems especially able to cultivate. This course also orients literary students to a different way of working with textual material than is generally encouraged in the classroom: rather than always engaging in close reading, they are also urged, of necessity, to read selectively, to scan, to skim, to skip around—which is to say, to practise the very "discontinuous" kind of reading that many scholars of the history of reading have identified as characteristic of the early modern period.[3] This is the only feasible way to take in and respond to the vast quantities of text that I ask them to survey each week. This kind of reading requires them

[3] For an analysis of early modern discontinuous reading, see Peter Stallybrass, "Books and Scrolls: Navigating the Bible" (*Books and Readers in Early Modern England*, ed. Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer, University of Pennsylvania, 2005. 42-79). For a comparative assessment of the value of discontinuous and continuous ways of reading in the period, see J.B. Lethbridge, "Anthological Reading and Writing in Tudor England" (*Anthologies of British Poetry: Critical Perspectives from Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Barbara Korte, Ralf Schneider and Stefanie Lethbridge. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. 57-73).

to make active and important choices about where to direct their attention and how to focus their minds as they forge their way amidst the textual remains. I encourage them to work with the content of the records (which I only wish could be more comprehensive) as well as the content of the text; I encourage them to work with the paratextual material, which at first seems to them such an obstacle to early modern texts, but which they shortly realize often offers a kind of skeleton key to the innards of the item they are considering. I think that such selective reading is a skill that they will all appreciate having honed once they make their way into the outside world, with its similar morass of memos and reports to be mentally processed. Overall, one effect is to make clear why scholarly work is as specialized as it is, since it becomes rapidly evident that there is no real way to generalize about something even as apparently local and confined as the textual culture of 1523 or 1563—at least not without misrepresenting it.

What works, and what could work better?

Based on my experiences, I have often considered in the wake of discussions and assignments in these courses the questions of what works in the classroom with EEBO-TCP, and what could work better. I would like to summarize my current answers here.

First: some elements that help EEBO-TCP work in the classroom:

1. It helps if students have access to the resource on an ongoing basis throughout the class period (just as we require students to bring their textbooks to each class).
2. This means that students need personal computers connected wirelessly to the classroom, and for that wireless connection must be *fast.*
3. Since both the period and the technology can be alienating, it helps to make their first search one that *they* choose, based on their interests and expertise, in order to give them confidence and bolster their motivation.
4. It helps to pair a request to survey a large swath of material with a request to focus their attention on a single artifact.
5. It works to avoid downplaying the sheer weirdness of what's there to be found; early tracts on vegetarianism and beard-wearing catch the eye and capture the imagination. I emphasize the value (and privilege) of finding out-of-the-way, non-canonical material which can lead to original work.
6. It works to contextualize and compare EEBO as a resource in relation to other media: not only textbooks or scholarly editions but, ideally, original material editions via a visit to the Rare Books room.

What could help EEBO-TCP do better work in the classroom?

1. There is, as always, a need for greater speed, both when turning pages within an item and when moving between the search-results pages. One naturally wants to be able to move through a book on the screen at the same rate as one might thumb through a material book; if not, the digital book makes the case for its predecessor quite neatly.
2. The ability to see more than forty search results per page, and to convert those results easily into a table, would assist with large-scale searches.
3. The ability to fit the page-display to occupy one's full screen would improve legibility and eliminate the need to scroll in order to access controls for turning pages and so on.

4. A tool that let one hover over a portion of full-text and have the corresponding photographic image appear adjacently would allow for quick comparison.
5. A more accurate portrayal in the transcriptions of printed marginalia and their original locations would make it harder to ignore these important paratexts.
6. A compression or elimination of line breaks that show where pages end in the full-text transcriptions would save space on screen and paper.
7. Finally, a true luxury would be the integration of closely related or supporting digital resources, through, for instance, the addition of links, not just from authors' names to their entries Literature Online, but from subject fields to more general encyclopedias of early modern culture; ideally, individual words could even link to the OED or other relevant lexicons.

Conclusion

Some years ago I was memorably surprised by the sneer of a reviewer's phrase used to characterize a paper of mine as "EEBO-driven." While I was pleased to take up the more constructive suggestions offered, this particular phrase stuck with me because it struck me as so odd to imagine, and irresponsible to suggest, that a database might ever occupy the driver's seat, whether in research or in teaching. Rather, as I try to show my students, EEBO is a vehicle that permits those willing to climb aboard, and to learn its controls, to reach and explore remote textual and historical places, and to move across them at paces unprecedented before the adoption of this technology, particularly by institutions that are resource-poor with respect to rare books. I think of us all, always, as test-driving a vehicle like EEBO-TCP, since its makers have shown themselves to be responsive to the experiences and expressed needs of its users and eager to adapt their product to suit them better. I am grateful for the opportunity offered in this forum to articulate some suggestions about how to improve the ride, as well as to describe some of the trips EEBO-TCP has permitted my students and me to take to date.

Works Cited

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