

Heather L. Bennett Dissertation Defense Presentation Transcript

00:00: "Hashtag History: Historical Thinking and Social Media in an Undergraduate Classroom in Singapore" is a dissertation focused on two central questions.

00:10: First, what does social media do to students' perceptions of history? And second, what is history's value to students (especially non-history majors) in a digital world.

00:22: I argue in this dissertation, first and foremost, that social media is a key part of students' webs of understanding. This argument builds on the work of other historical thinking scholars who have investigated the roles of national narratives, family stories, and personal identity markers like race, gender, ethnic identity, and linguistics, on students' approaches to history. In this dissertation I build on that scholarship by arguing that social media is an equally important sociocultural influence to investigate.

00:54: In the three content chapters of the dissertation, I posit that social media habits frame students reactions, especially their emotional reactions to history, guide what they pay attention to in terms of historical content, and provide a visual and textual vocabulary for students to articulate their understandings of history.

01:15: I also argue throughout that the influence of social media in the classroom is both beneficial and detrimental. It's important to focus on both sides because if we ignore the benefits, we ignore the possibility of leveraging social media to aid our students' understanding of history. If we don't focus on the detriments, however, we miss opportunities to disrupt social media habits that prevent our students from growing their historical skills and knowledge.

01:42: In terms of how history is useful to students in the digital age, I argue that history is useful to students' navigation of social media. In particular, the historical discipline has the capacity to build empathy and complicate attention habits. These skills in turn have the potential to give students greater agency and power in their online lives.

02:04: The setting for this study deeply influenced the shape of the questions I asked and conclusions at which I arrived. The study took place within the University at Buffalo's undergraduate program in Singapore, which is hosted by the Singapore Institute of Management. I've been an instructor here since 2014.

02:23: The program does not offer a history major or indeed any humanities majors. In keeping with Singapore's very pragmatic view of higher education, the program instead

offers majors with a more direct path into the workforce. In particular, we offer Sociology, Psychology, Business, Communications, Economics, and International Trade.

02:44: Although no humanities majors are offered, students are required to take liberal arts courses in order to complete their degree program. One of the courses they must take is the course that I teach, an undergraduate world history course spanning the period from about 3500 BCE to 1500 CE.

03:03: My course is always digitally engaged and in Spring 2017 when I collected my data, that meant that the students and I used Twitter to facilitate course discussion and complete assessments. We also used a blogging project throughout the semester in which students created blog posts and then left comments on one another's posts. The data collected for this study consists of 11,454 tweets as well as 74 blog posts plus the attending comments created by the 150 students enrolled in my course during the Spring 2017 semester.

03:38: All data was public at the time of collection and students were aware that I was collecting their data. We had open conversations in class in terms of what that meant for what they produced for the class. It also gave me the opportunity to give them options for controlling their digital identity within the course. For instance, they had the option to protect their Twitter accounts so they could not be web scraped. They could also choose to use pseudonyms for our public writing project—for the blogging project itself.

04:06: From the dataset, three intersections between social media habits and historical thinking skills emerged. The first of these intersections is between affect and historical empathy and I argue in this chapter that intense affective response—so, embodied, intense, emotional response—can hinder historical empathy but that affect also drives curiosity and with it the growth of context knowledge. As I noted at the beginning, the chapter looks at both the detriments and benefits of this particular social media habit in the classroom.

04:43: The second intersection I drew out of the dataset is between the attention economy and historical significance. In this chapter I posit that perceptions of historical significance depend on what captures students' attention. As is so often the case for content online, in the classroom students show a preference for the things that are unexpected, tap into their identity, or surprise them. This does not mean however that educators, particularly history educators, need to compete for students' attention. Instead, we can leverage attention economy habits to call our students' attention to what we deem important within the course. We can also make students more aware of the influence the attention economy has on their lives. They already show some

awareness as well as a remarkable ability to manipulate the attention economy for their own purposes, particularly when they're given the opportunity to create their own historical narratives. That showed up in the blogging project especially.

05:41: Finally, I investigated the influence of visual media, particularly GIFs, in the classroom and I looked at this form of visual media as both an affordance and a constraint. Visual media affords social connection, play, and pleasure in learning, but the tendency for GIFs to produce context collapse and the “anything goes” quality of these images tends to run contrary to the pursuits of historical significance and historical empathy.

06:10: Because this project focused on digital data as well as digital presentation, I used hybrid methods and frameworks in order to make sense of the data. In terms of methods, the first thing I did was collect the data using web scraping. I used DocNow, which is a Python-based program. Ian Milligan of the University at Waterloo set up for me and was gracious enough to share with me. I used that web-scraping program for all of the Twitter data. In terms of harvesting the blog posts themselves, I used simple copy and paste. Most web scrapers are very good at collecting data from tables and numeric, well-ordered data, but not very good at collecting large pieces of text.

06:52: In addition, in terms of analysis, I used text mining—in particular sentiment analysis and word frequencies. I ran both forms of text mining through RStudio using packages formatted for the programming language R. I used coding as form of analysis as well, and this is a social science method derived from sociology, psychology, and communications. My colleagues in those fields here at the UB-SIM program were a huge asset in terms of using this particular method. The method allows labeling, categorizing, and finding major themes within a large body of text and because of that it can be used qualitatively or quantitatively.

07:33: Finally I used close reading, which is a thoroughly qualitative and often historical method. It focuses on details rather than the big picture and it looks for layers of meaning within small portions of text or images.

07:74: The frameworks I employed for this dissertation were likewise hybrid. I first used historical thinking, which is the core piece of this project. Historical thinking is a field that focuses on the skills and practices historians and students use to create accurate, engaging, and relevant accounts of the past. Historical significance and historical empathy are both subfields of the historical thinking field.

08:14: I also used social media research, both scholarly and popular. On the popular side, I used research conducted by social media giants like BuzzFeed and YouTube and Google, who are all obviously interested in what people pay attention to and why.

08:30: Finally, I used the field of digital media and learning, in particular the literature surrounding participatory cultures. This field is championed particularly by Henry Jenkins and the idea is that the web at this point in time is innately participatory in large part because there are low barriers to people creating, sharing, and interacting with one another's content.

08:53: I also used what's becoming known as the new education. This idea from Cathy Davidson and the authors of *Hacking the Academy* especially. The idea behind their work is that it's time for educators to rethink the structures of how we communicate content in the classroom and to ensure that these structures are as participatory and collaborative as possible whenever possible.

09:18: The project is formatted as a digital dissertation and so I want to take a moment to address the motivations for this as well as how to navigate the project itself.

09:28: In terms of motivations, I had three. The first is that I wanted to preserve my dataset in as dynamic a way as possible. Because I'm embedding tweets, videos, GIFs, images, hyperlinks in the dissertation, a website turned out to be the best way to do that rather than a traditional format like a static PDF. Using a website also allowed me to preserve the original context in which these elements appeared. Readers can therefore interact with the threads of tweets, with various posts, and with comment threads on the blog.

10:02: Second, I wanted to ensure transparency, especially transparency for my students. They were generous about sharing their data with me and I so wanted to ensure that I shared mine in return. Hashtag History presented publicly so students, if they choose, can have access to how I used their data and the ways in which their public information was transformed into the conclusions of this dissertation.

10:30: Finally, I wanted to use the format of this dissertation to forward the conversation surrounding web accessibility in the digital humanities and graduate research. This project models and it highlights the need for more inclusive presentations of scholarship, including dissertations, by modeling aspects of web accessibility. The images within the dissertation conform to standards for alt text, navigation links are provided in ways that have natural language rather than simply "click here," and in

general I have worked to ensure that the website conforms to the standards set up by W3C and WebAIM at this point in time.

11:09: In terms of navigating the site this can be done in both linear and non-linear ways. Linear navigation on the site is accomplished through the inclusion of a table of contents, section outlines in each portion of the dissertation, and next-page buttons at the bottom of each page. Theoretically, a reader could begin at the very first page and by clicking through the next page buttons continue on right on through to the end of the dissertation.

11:34: However, I've also set it up so that it can be read in a non-linear ways. This means that it can be read in any order, it can be read selectively, and in order to ensure this is possible, I have provided links back to other portions of the dissertation in order to clarify information that may not be visible directly in the section a person is reading.

11:55: To demonstrate these linear and non-linear formats very briefly, I'm going to turn to "Hashtag History" itself, to the website that is dissertation.heatherlbennett.com. This is "Hashtag History" as it currently stands. Much of the website is currently password protected and will be until the 19th of April at which point it will go live when I submit the final edition to Drew University.

12:20: Accessibility features are partly visible in this widget here and that's available in the sidebar on desktop or full-screen windows of your web browser. If it's a smaller screen, it moves to the footer. You can toggle high contrast as well as toggle the font size. And these aren't all of the accessibility features, but they're the ones most immediately encountered. In addition, the site is entirely searchable, so a reader can search for specific words and find all instances of a word, phrase or topic within the website.

13:00: As I noted before, a reader could begin at the very top of the table of contents which begins with "Navigating Hashtag History." The reader can then skim or read through the page and at the very bottom, they'll find a "next page" button to take them on to the next section of the dissertation. And that's included at the end of each and every page. So again, the reader can proceed in this fashion all the way through to the very last portion of the dissertation as it currently stands, to the "Downloads and Datasets" section.

13:39: Alternatively, if a reader chooses to read in a non-linear patterns, I make sure to provide links to other portions of the dissertation as needed. So for instance in the "Understanding and Care" section of "Affect and Historical Empathy," footnote number

five mentions that I coded the Women Subset, which is the portion of the tweets I'm using for analysis in this section. If the reader clicks down to the footnote, there's a link to the "Methodology: Data Analysis" section in which I provide a more detailed description of coding as a form of analysis.

14:17: To return to that portion of the page, the reader simply clicks the back button and it returns them to the portion of the page that they began on.

14:28: With that, I conclude my portion of the dissertation defense. Again the website for "Hashtag History" is dissertation.heatherlbennett.com. Thank you for listening and if you would like a copy of the slides, they can be found in PDF form at bit.ly/hlbdefense.