Transcript

[00:00] [music]

Derek Bruff: [00:10] This is "Leading Lines." I'm Derek Bruff. One of the ways that we're exploring the future of educational technology here on the podcast, is through conversations with the Faculty of Tomorrow. We featured a number of graduate students here on Leading Lines, all doing really interesting things with technology in their teaching.

[00:24] And all, as it turns out, having been HASTAC scholars while they were at Vanderbilt. HASTAC is the Humanities, Arts, Sciences and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory. What's important to know is that HASTAC provides a variety of opportunities for scholars, especially those in the humanities.

[00:40] To explore the intersection of teaching, research, and technology. The HASTAC scholars program designed to help graduate students network, connect and learn, has been particularly effective here at Vanderbilt.

[00:53] The Center for Teaching, the Vanderbilt Libraries, the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, and other units here on campus have been supporting HASTAC Scholars since 2011. Each year bringing a new cohort of fascinating young scholars interested in exploring digital scholarship and digital pedagogy.

[01:09] In this episode of Leading Lines, I get to introduce our listeners to two more HASTAC scholars. Paula Andrade is a second-year graduate student in history here at Vanderbilt. Paula is currently serving as a Center for Teaching's HASTAC Scholar. She's spending the year learning about digital literacies and how to teach them.

[01:26] As part of that work, she decided to interview another HASTAC Scholar for Leading Lines. Nathan Dize is a PhD candidate in the Department of French and Italian and a HASTAC Scholar with the Vanderbilt Digital Cultural Heritage Research Cluster.

[01:41] In the interview, which you're about to hear, Paula talks to Nathan about the digital archive project he built into a course on the Haitian Revolution. The intentional ways he uses technology to support his teaching goals and the value of turning a class into a learning community.

[01:55] [background music]

Paula Andrade: [01:59] Thank you Nathan, for being here with us today at Leading Lines. I'd like you to tell us a little bit about your teaching context. What courses do you teach? Who are the students? Just briefly, if you can, contextualize that for us.

Nathan Dize: [02:14] Thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here. I teach primarily French language courses here at Vanderbilt. Although I have served as a TA for a comparative course on the French and Haitian Revolution.

[02:29] As well as the teaching assistant for Introduction Haitian Creole. And, so the context of both of those two different categories are radically different when I'm in charge of a class versus when I'm the teaching assistant for a class.

[02:54] When I'm in charge of a class, I'm the one who plans the lesson for the day. I'm usually given a syllabus, but the day-to-day is up to me and how I prepare the students for the test that they'll then take. Which we all write collectively.

[03:05] When I'm a TA, it's more of a matter of figuring out how I can support the professor, the teacher of the class. When I was a TA for the course on the Haitian and French Revolutions, it was my advisor.

[03:24] He gave me permissions and license to create and use the course in a way that was useful for me, so I designed a final assignment for the course. Which culminated in the creation of a digital project, that all six students bought into. I scaffolded it that throughout the semester, and that was my contribution to the course.

[03:48] When I was the TA for the Haitian Creole course I was mostly there as classroom tech support and linguistic support, since that course is taught at Duke. When I was in France teaching English, I taught 20th century-21st century migrant literature and world literature, as well as some more basic language classes, TOEFL certification, things like that.

[04:13] Pretty much, NPR was our source text [laughs] for learning, learning just Americanized

English, North American English.

Paula: [04:26] Very interesting. The students are regular undergrads. Who are they?

Nathan: [04:32] Here at Vanderbilt, they're primarily undergraduates. I guess we'd say traditional aged. So that would be 18 to probably like 23. It's the cap on that for the student population I've experienced here. However, at the University of Maryland, where I was previously. I had students who are non-traditionally aged into their 40s and 50s, and sometimes even older.

[05:01] That also adds a new element to the mix when you're talking about learning language. We learn and form language skills at a very young age. Those types of students need different type of support than the traditional aged students.

[05:18] Also, when I was teaching at the University of Maryland, right next to the university. In the area that the university is, um, there's a rather large Latinx population folks from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala. A lot of the times, when they come to me they're learning a third language.

[05:37] They have already this repertoire of romance language grammar that they can draw on. Sometimes, that is a problem because they get too comfortable, and work too comparatively. Most of the time I'd say that's a virtue, any second language experiences. Even if it's English, it helps when the students come to me.

Paula: [06:05] Very interesting. You said you were working as a support in terms of technology. Would you expand a little bit on that with the students?

Nathan: [06:17] With the Haitian Creole class very rudimentary, just operating in the tech room, making sure that the microphone volumes are right and everything like that.

[06:30] With the French and Haitian Revolution's class, what I did was I designed this sort of intro to digital humanities component into this course, where, um, we went step-by-step working with original archival documents in French available on Internet archive, through Brown University's Haiti collection.

[06:56] Students had to go to the collection, find a text that I had pulled out. I had given them a list of about 15 texts from which they could choose and so they chose a text. They were given the full text of the OCR document. I told them, "OK. Well, now that you have your

document, find a part that's interesting to you."

[07:17] In the way that we're going to find an interesting piece, is we're going to use Voyant Tools to find individual moments in which the text, sort of, reach peaks or valleys in terms of certain themes. So I'll explain that.

[07:32] For example, somebody had a medical history of the "Patient Evolution" written by the French, commissioned by the French government to explore why soldiers were dying. They had yellow fever. We were able to pinpoint using Voyant Tools and the frequency of particular words coming up, where the text talked about that process of dying.

[08:00] That was very interesting to the student who is studying Medicine, Health, and Society. She's like, "Well, you know, I'm thinking about going to medical school. I'm actually pretty interested in epidemiology." She was able to pinpoint those moments through the use of this tool.

[08:14] Then another layer was, "OK, now that we have this OCR, anybody who's used sort of primary source documents in any other language, will notice that the diacritics are all wrong." If you're working with text from the 18th century, the spelling might be different.

[08:34] I said, "First, before we can even work with these and begin to sort of translate them," because the exercise was you would translate them then curate them.

[08:44] Before we can translate it, we need to put it in a French that we understand, right? So, then they had to practice their own French orthography and grammar by putting these texts into a modern French. I meant mostly just correcting spelling, or adding diacritics.

[09:01] After that, the students then translated a section roughly 500 to 1,000 words. Then the final layers were, they had to juxtapose the original and the French, and introduce the reader to the text where they're situating themselves in this text, because some of the texts were, you know, 200 pages.

[09:26] Why this portion? Why is this portion interesting? What's happening? Where are we? Angling out to say, maybe, what this might mean for this text. The whole plan of the class, the project, it culminated in this website that we created the Scaler, that was the web designer for this.

[09:47] I showed them how Scaler worked, and how one could build a website that resembled

a book, and use the same logic as a book turning pages and going from one section to another from left to right.

[09:59] And the whole project was called "Saint-Domingue Lost, Imperial Narratives of the Haitian Revolution." We're talking about this specific type of narrative. While they were doing all this work to read and interpret these documents, they were also reading and interpreting how the French saw their own attempt to retake the colony of Saint-Domingue that then became Haiti.

[10:26] They were learning how to parse these discourses of imperialism and colonialism, fighting against slave rebellion. Right, so we're sort of like reading from the perspective of the bad guys. In today's parlance, it might be even reading the fake news.

[10:45] We're reading this tale of plight, this tale of, "We're losing all that we have," but what they're losing is, they're losing their right to enslave people. [laughs]

[10:58] It led to very fruitful discussions about, you know, how we can dismantle these types of narratives. How we then can display this type of thinking online in a space where sometimes it's not so certain which outlets are telling which types of narratives, and how they're arriving at those conclusions. So that was… that was the gist of that assignment.

Paula: [11:25] That sounds great, and you seem to have a lot of experience working with different groups and different ages. With these activities that you were able to participate and engage with, I was wondering how did they help meet the goals that you had for the students?

Nathan: [11:49] Yeah, I think one of the things that you have to take into account is if you're implementing digital humanities or technology into a French classroom or a language setting, um, you have to decide what you want the students to get out of that, at each individual point in time. When we were using Voyant Tools, um, we were able to see what the frequency of articles were.

[12:21] Articles and prepositions, those get pulled out and extracted from the list of words that you see that appear on the frequency. They'll appear the most frequently. We're able to go through and see particular vocabulary words like, "Oh, what does vomir mean? Oh, it means to vomit. Oh, we're seeing this in a medical text, so that clearly means that, like, this is a frequent occurrence."

[12:49] It can get sensational and interesting that way. Also, then when they had to go correct the OCR, the original French drawn from the textual imaging, they're doing deep, sort of, orthography work. What that does is it allows you to work with the language in one instance.

[13:17] Then when we start to understand and unpack discourse, we get to the more meaning-based stuff, rather than the meta-linguistic or even just the linguistic.

[13:31] Planning an activity like this, an exercise like this, takes time, right, and a lot of troubleshooting, and finding the right tools. And sometimes, things don't work out the way you want them to. Or they work out in a different way, and it's more productive than the way that you'd envisioned.

[13:51] I hadn't even envisioned Voyant Tools being that helpful for finding students something to work on. There's this way of seeing the narrative through those charts and graphs that visually creates a sensation with the students and they find appealing.

[14:09] They were able to find a moment where the word "death" came up or the word "revolution" came up. They were looking for a particular figure, and we were able to search through and find that person's name. That's how they were able to pinpoint it.

[14:28] A lot of it is what do you want to get out of the activity that you're planning, and how are you going to do that with the tools that you're using. When we pick up a pencil or a pen, do we want to be able to erase, or do we want it to be permanent?

Paula: [14:44] Very interesting. So you mentioned the Voyant Tools and Scaler, that you had experience working with. With Scaler, I was wondering if you could elaborate. You said it works as a book?

Nathan: [14:57] It's path-based. When you lift up the hood and you're designing it, you can create an order that you want readers to read in. It's not as dynamic as something when you think of like -- I don't know -- if Prezi goes necessarily in an alphanumeric order. It's not like this thing where you can go off in this direction or that direction. The web designer sets the order.

[15:25] It was very important for us, when we were doing historical work, to be chronological. Scaler works that way, with the paths. It also sets something up to resemble a book. You read from beginning to end. So for instance, two students found one text particularly interesting.

Normally, I would say, "No, pick a different one."

[15:52] Since they both found it very interesting and they both wanted to work on the start of a particular chapter. Then follow up with the following chapter, I said, "OK, well this is very interesting. This is where we get to really sort of see what the technology can do, in terms of presenting one excerpt, that then is followed by its immediate successor."

[16:14] So that book format helped in terms of providing some continuity, I think, for the readers, reading it online.

Paula: [16:22] Awesome. What would be your goal as a teacher, for yourself, and for your students?

Nathan: [16:30] This is something I think about all the time, constantly. I'm constantly working towards this ideal community. Ideally, I set a standard that then provides the students with something to respond to, something that they can buy into. Right, they see, clearly defined, the rules, the parameters, what I expect out of an assignment, what I expect them to come to class.

[17:04] The curiosity that I expect them to come to class with. Then I respond by reciprocating, whether it's curiosity or engagement with their work, a feedback loop. It's something that I get something out of them and they get something out of me, so there's a reciprocity to it. That's why I call it community.

[17:28] I think that if there isn't that, sort of, space within a classroom—a language classroom— there's a rupture in communication. We're not learning how to communicate anymore, we're just learning how to absorb. I've never felt comfortable being in a classroom where the environment was tense and the professor was at the helm professing, rather than middling amongst us.

[17:59] We see that in seminar rooms. We see that in classrooms where you may have 20 students and it's a literature-based classroom or a text-based classroom, rather than a language classroom and you circle up.

[18:11] That's another way of creating community. It can either be, sort of this metaphysical, aspectual ambiance in the classroom, or you can physically create that. One of the ways that I do that is I come to class, and I totally stole this from one of my friends, this maneuver.

[18:36] I come to class with a deck of cards, and I pair them off either in twos, threes, or fours. I just distribute the cards as the students walk in. It literally shuffles the deck and allows people to experience other people in the community that they haven't.

[18:51] That's when I'm working with a classroom where there are too many chairs. You can't, "Oh, I'm going to move my desk over here." You just get up and move to a different space. If there are a bunch of tables, I might say, "This row, go over here, that row, go over there, for today," so that everybody gets to experience the community and sort of buy into it in a different way.

[19:17] Nobody's ever uncomfortable with being too comfortable, right? You know students go and sit in the same spot every single day from the beginning of the semester to the end. I think if we disrupt that, then we can come into a really productive sort of space.

[19:34] Another way that I do this is just last week we had a technology detox. I know we're going to talk about analog tools as well, but this detox was, "OK, I'm going to come to class with photocopies for you. No computers, no cell phones.

"[19:53] I'm not allowed to use a computer or a cell phone. If you don't know a word, I'll write it on the board. If I don't know it, I'll figure it out for you, and I'll tell you next time.

"[20:02] Today we're going to try to see how we can rely on the materials that we have and be curious again, rather than having something that can give us all the answers all the time."

Paula: [20:17] That's great, especially for language teaching. I had the experience of I was an English teacher in Brazil, and I was able to teach Portuguese here. Definitely making sense and trying to engage the students.

[20:30] That's the best way to learn a new language. You need to communicate. You need to become comfortable, because it's part of the process of learning new words and how to express yourself in a different context.

Nathan: [20:45] Absolutely.

Paula: [20:46] Going on with that, I was wondering. When you were working with technology and you were working with your students, and you have developed these projects that have helped them understand French and culture and the history as well, what challenges have you faced when using technology?

Nathan: [21:08] Two things come to mind. One, when we reach a moment of saturation and there's too much technology. In fact, I did it today. I was on Brightspace, on the eText, and on Google Maps, all at the same time. I was like, "Oh. Well, look over here. Oh, look over here. Oh, look over there," and it becomes a little... I don't know.

[21:36] You can...you can really see it coming apart at the seams sometimes when you're stretched too thin in a moment when you're supposed to be hyperaware.

[21:45] We can talk about it next about intentionally teaching and having a pedagogy that's intentional. If you're over here, and over there and then over there, and you're intentional about it, it can come off really well. The students see that and buy into it because you've thought it out, you planned it out.

[22:05] If you go to this website, or you're working on that board and then you're like, "Oops. I forgot something over here," then they read that. They see that. They're paying attention, more to you in this comedy of errors, than actually learning. [laughs] Which, if you have no shame, then it goes off well, but if you internalize that then that can be your day for teaching.

[22:33] If you lose it and start blushing, if you can't bring it back full-circle, then that can be really challenging. I tell my students, when I mess up or I forget their name or something like that, they can say, "Shame," as a way of bringing levity to the classroom.

Paula: [22:55] Very nice. Apparently, the way you respond to these challenges are more natural. You tend to bring it down to a level of...not comfort, but at least make it understandable for the students, as well that it happens.

Nathan: [23:15] We have to be flexible with ourselves and with others. If I'm flexible with the students, they're more likely to be flexible with me when something that I plan doesn't work out the way it had been planned. Just last week or two weeks ago, I assigned something to reading that was a little challenging.

[23:38] I understand it was challenging, but I wanted to see what my students can do with it. They felt very apprehensive to the challenge. Mostly, because I didn't show them my thinking prior to that. Then I learned, "Oh well, I wasn't necessarily intentional with my practice there. I wasn't telling them."

[24:02] For me, it doesn't matter that you understand every single word in this essay. I'm

asking you to understand, to draw from the meaning of the whole thing, not the individual word that might be above the level that we're currently at, but we can get there together, if we can sort of get the gist.

Paula: [24:20] That's really great. Because here at Leading Lines, we explore the future of educational technology. I was wondering where would you like to see educational technology go in the next few years?

Nathan: [24:35] I would love to see educational technology make a greater leap towards open access, less proprietary software, more creative solutions. Potentially, even facilitating students as creators themselves.

[24:52] That's one of the things that I think if there's a success to draw from the classroom project that we did in that revolutions class, it was that the students then created a website.

[25:05] Sure, I was the Web designer and I provided that support, they didn't have to worry about that at all, but they populated all of the content. That resource is now available for other classes to then use. It's up there along with this whole catalog of other Scaler projects. Creating them is in the one instance and then finding them is the other.

[25:31] I just did a teacher workshop through the Center for Latin American Studies here with K-12 teachers. I saw before me very experienced teachers, but experienced teachers who needed to know where to look. I'm standing here before them as a specialist of something. They're like, "Well, where do we find the stuff to talk about your specialty? Oh, it's sharing."

[25:56] It's not only just, is it open access, but can people find it? Is it visible? You need spaces where those types of technologies are visible.

[26:07] Centers for teaching, other clearinghouses for different types of information are so important for their newsletter they send out or their listserv or whatever they tweet. Because then these open access materials, then can actually, really, fully be open access.

Paula: [26:26] That's great. I fully agree. That goes together with the next question that I have for you. For those of us who are starting to learn more about educational technology, who are not very aware yet of where to go as you mentioned, where do we go? Where can we find these tools and learn about these possibilities of sharing? Where do we start, if we're interested in that?

Nathan: [26:51] The creation and curation of access, for me, I fell into it by accident. [laughs] I know once I tell you that I fell into it by accident doesn't necessarily help you fall into it by accident, but it's just really test things out and play. Find these tools like YM tools and throw an open access novel into it.

[27:19] Say you're working with newspapers from a 19th century Rio de Janeiran newspaper. Throw a couple of articles into it and see what happens. I don't know, something like that. You can go listen to people talk about the things they've created, learning from their thinking.

[27:46] Because once someone's gone from the inception of a project to, at least, a version of the completion of the project, they've gathered a lot of information along the way, not just in terms of what we usually classify or qualify as expertise but architectural expertise in a way.

[28:09] I know how this website is made and how it thinks because I created it, or we created it together as part of a team. These are the decisions that we made so that people would read it this way, rather than another way.

[28:23] And you know, how to then see a project from start to finish is not just a matter of knowing a set of dates or a particular corpus. It's having this architectural idea, or there are people involved in the project that have that, and others have other expertise, so understanding too that you don't have to do it all.

[28:46] Once we take on a whole thing to do it all by ourselves, we might be missing things. I think it almost works better when there's a team. There's a natural sounding board. Learning can take place pretty naturally within that group.

[29:03] Then you're almost like using the project as your seminar space or your classroom space for something that you want to then see. Then you'll end up with a product at the end.

Paula: [29:13] Great. The second question is actually about analog technology here at Leading Lines. You talked about digital education and technologies. What would be your favorite analog education technology or technologies?

Nathan: [29:33] It took me a while to find this out, but I really love blackboards and whiteboards. Whiteboards are a little bit more friendly on the allergies. At the same time, I think those two, the whiteboard or the blackboard, provide the class with a certain dynamism

of thinking on your feet where you can write something up on the board and erase it.

[30:02] You can't do this with a PowerPoint unless you've planned your PowerPoint to have the eraser in there. Then it gets really complicated. You have to do all of that thinking prior to. It doesn't necessarily allow the students to spontaneously react to it.

[30:18] When I'm teaching language, for instance, if we're working with a particular word and students find it troubling, or hard to pronounce, or something like that, I'll throw out eight homophones on the board. We'll practice pronunciation of all eight of those.

[30:34] They could have nothing to do with the current word that we're working with or that they're finding hard to pronounce, but it has everything to do with them making the language very playful and allowing them to absorb it.

[30:50] It's like in "Harry Potter," when you turn the boggart into whatever you most fear, and then you make fun of it. The blackboard allows you to have that spontaneity or individual, subjective unpacking based on the student. One student will have one question. Another student will have another, but we'll all figure it out together. We'll all be able to see that work done.

[31:14] I also like when the boards are dispersed throughout the classroom. I can go to one for another thing, to another for a completely different thing, and leave them up and let them linger. Then students with their smartphones can just take pictures of them, and then they have their notes, or they have our notes...our class' notes. That's why I like the blackboards and the whiteboards.

Paula: [31:35] Sounds great. I think that's a great way to end our interview. Thank you very much for coming and talking to us.

[31:45] [background music]

Nathan: [31:45] Thank you so much for having me. It was a pleasure.

Derek: [31:50] That was PhD student and HASTAC Scholar, Nathan Dize, interviewed by fellow PhD student and HASTAC Scholar, Paula Andrade. Thanks to Nathan for sharing his experiences, weaving digital and analog technologies into his teaching. And thanks to Paula for bringing us this interview.

[32:04] For more information on both Nathan and Paula and the HASTAC Scholars Program, as well as links to the tools and projects Nathan mentioned in his interview, see the show notes for this episode.

[32:14] I'll have to add… It's my understanding that most universities that sponsor HASTAC Scholars only sponsor one or two per year. At Vanderbilt, we've always sponsored a bunch of them. I think we've had as many as eight or nine per year, all sponsored by different units here on campus.

[32:30] I have to say it's been really great to have that kind of cohort approach to the HASTAC Scholars Program. They're all interested in various aspects of digital learning, digital pedagogy, digital scholarship. And giving them a chance to connect with each other has been really great.

[32:46] It's also given these various units that sponsor them a chance to get together and share what we're doing, learn about each other's work through our HASTAC Scholars. I don't know that all schools can follow that model, but I wanted to say that it's been great here at Vanderbilt.

[33:02] I want to thank Mona Frederick, our outgoing executive director of the humanities center here at Vanderbilt for getting us started with that many years ago. Mona is retiring this year. Sad to see her go, but very happy for her as well. She's one of my favorite people.

[33:22] Anyway, if you're looking for more information on the HASTAC Scholars Program or our guests this episode, head over to our website, leadinglinespod.com.

[33:31] If you have thoughts about this episode, please share them either on the website or on Twitter where we can be found @leadinglinespod. We also have an email address, leadinglinespod@vanderbilt.edu. I don't know that anyone's ever used that, but maybe you'll be the first.

[33:47] Leading Lines is produced by the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching, the Vanderbilt Institute for Digital Learning, the Jean and Alexander Heard Libraries, as well as the associate provost for education development and technologies, John Sloop.

[33:57] This episode was edited by Rhett McDaniel. Look for new episodes the first and third Monday of each month. I'm your host, Derek Bruff. Thanks for listening.

[34:06] [music]