Flipping Whitman: Students as Teachers
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Catherine: About a decade ago, I wrote in the Spring 2009 issue of this journal about the benefits for students and faculty alike of using wikis alongside the online digital Walt Whitman Archive (www.whitmanarchive.org). In the years since, I've become more deeply immersed in the world of digital humanities pedagogy, but I've also discovered that one of the most effective ways to reach students encountering Walt Whitman for the first time, or even for the tenth, is via good old-fashioned manuscript-based study of his poetry.¹ To use manuscripts as effectively as possible, and to help me "flip" my literary classrooms to make face-to-face time more productive, I've combined manuscript study with digital humanities approaches to supervise students as they created the Walt Whitman Video Series, which frees class time for collaborative wrestling with Whitman's manuscripts. My co-author here, Sarah Wishnewsky, a former graduate student in English at my institution and current community college English instructor, worked with other advanced students, whose perspectives appear below, to create an ongoing series of short videos introducing Whitman and the digital archive.² The videos, some publicly available on YouTube and many more privately available to course participants, have been assigned to students from introductory through graduate-level courses as homework alongside reading assignments.

In this essay, we explain how this video project "flipped" not only my classrooms but also the traditional relationship between faculty and students, as making the videos meant that these students effectively became their peers' instructors for a small but meaningful percentage of each course. The student video-creators generated both high-quality pedagogical materials

² Lee, Lim, and Kim, and others consider "flipping" to be specifically relevant only to "blended" courses—that is, courses that are part online and part face-to-face, in fact referring to flipped classrooms as "a newly emerging type of blended learning" (428), but our Whitman videos have been used in only one blended course (a large lecture Introduction to American Literature). The remainder of students who used—and created—the videos were in 100% face-to-face lecture-discussion courses, including advanced seminars.
and genuinely new knowledge. By writing together, Sarah and I seek to replicate this cooperative process of creating high-quality teaching and learning materials. We aim to explain some of our nuts-and-bolts methods but, more significantly, to reveal how an ambitious project like this one can change students' relationships to knowledge, make usefully transparent the pedagogical motivations of faculty, and help faculty to learn and benefit long-term from their students' contributions.

Sarah: When I was an English graduate student, working on this project with Catherine placed me outside of my comfort zone. I had never worked with technology to create anything meaningful. Perhaps, then, one of the best parts about this project is its lasting impact on my professional endeavors as an English instructor, both face-to-face and online.

Before beginning the project, I had to learn what it even meant "flip" a literary classroom. It was a term I hadn't heard before, and I think most students probably haven't heard it, either. Generally, "flipping" is understood to mean that students learn new material at home, rather than during an in-class lecture. Students and instructors then use class time together to complete what traditionally would have been "homework"—that is, they use class time to engage with the new material by completing problem sets or other assignments, often collaboratively. Bang Nguyen et al hypothesize that the flipped classroom engages far more students, mainly due to the "availability" of the instructor during the crucial time when students are engaging with content, not merely being exposed to or absorbing it: in a flipped classroom, the instructor can focus far more of his/her energy on interacting with students and answering their questions. Ideally, when executed properly, the flipped classroom can reach some otherwise unreachable students—as Nguyen calls them, the "silent failers" (52).

Clarice Moran and Carl Young, who have studied the use of videos in particular in flipped classrooms, have offered advice for instructors to better prepare students to use videos as part of their learning. They claim that if teachers are going to use a flipped classroom strategy, it is imperative that "students can interact with and process the digital videos they are viewing effectively" (Moran and Young 45). In other words, students should be able to actively engage with the content they are viewing at home. Moran and Young suggest providing students with
a platform to take notes while viewing digital content. Providing students with digital materials that are actually interactive—that is, that require them to participate and not just passively observe—would be beneficial as well.

**Catherine:** I agree with Moran and Young. Our Whitman videos have been most effective when students had well-defined directions on how to use them. This was most clear with the "Introduction to the Archive" video, the first video in the series—one created before we knew there would be a series. This ten-minute video aims to teach students how to navigate within and make best use of the tools and resources offered by the Walt Whitman Archive. When I assigned students merely to "watch the video" for homework, I noticed that, while they seemed to have done so, they couldn't just jump right in to actually using the archive during our class manuscript activity: I still had to actively train them before we began our work in earnest. However, when their homework was not just to watch the video but to "watch the video and play along"—that is, to follow its instruction to open a new browser to the Whitman Archive while watching and actually try the methods and tips provided in the video—I didn't have to answer a single question during class about how to navigate the archive. They were already comfortable "mucking around" in the archive, and they were ready to help each other should the need arise.

My experience is backed up by the limited literature on flipped classrooms, which emphasizes that the out-of-class and in-class work must be mutually reinforcing. According to Nguyen et al, "To make reverse teaching work successfully, it is vital that students understand the necessity to prepare and to show up to the classes for the activities. … students [must find] … the classes useful and complementary to the self-preparation" (56). If students are taking the time to process lecture materials at home, the out-of-class work must be necessary to the in-class work in order for students to value it. In our case, this meant that a video introduction to the Whitman Archive had to be both an "active" (not passive) homework task and followed up in class by an activity that actually used the archive meaningfully. Without the in-class follow-up, students find the videos to be superfluous.
When students "watched actively," they were ready to go at the beginning of the next class: they wanted to "try it," whether "it" meant exploring the Whitman Archive generally or digging in to its manuscript holdings specifically. This seems to me to jibe with my teaching experiences more generally: while there's a place for lecturing—and I do it frequently—students usually react with enthusiasm to workshop-style class days, and they often learn more quickly and deeply by doing than just by listening (which is also, of course, an important skill). In a literature class, "doing" means many activities beyond lecturing that take place in the classroom daily: discussing, completing close readings, asking questions, writing—and "doing" also means reading. Reading, like watching one of our videos, ideally is not a passive activity. Upon learning of flipped pedagogy, then, my first reaction was that it all seemed very familiar: in my experience, many, if not most, literature classrooms have in important ways always-already been "flipped." As Haerin Shin puts it, "flipping" isn't new to those of us who teach literature: "one of the most innovative approaches in contemporary pedagogy is already an embedded practice in my discipline."

But, this doesn't mean that we have nothing to learn from a new perspective on old practices. In the remainder of this essay, then, we intend not to suggest that instructors replace our discipline’s many successful pedagogical methods but instead to provide an alternative to coexist alongside lecturing, discussion, workshopping, and other techniques. Watching the videos—and, especially, creating them, for the students who get to do so—mixes things up in a way that can keep student interest and allow the classroom hours to be spent on higher-order analysis and synthesis of information. Also, it can be inspiring for students to watch the videos knowing that former students from their very own institution created them and that they, too, might have a chance to do so. Several times, in fact, this classroom work has fed directly back into the videos. In the case of Sarah Horne, quoted below, she wrote and created her videos after completing an undergraduate Whitman seminar and a graduate Early American Poetry seminar with me, and it was by while completing collaborative manuscript

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3 The motto of my university is actually "Learn By Doing," so my students might be unusually well prepared for projects such as the manuscript study and video-creation projects. 
projects that she and her classmates came up with several of the arguments that appear in her videos!

One big take-away of the Whitman video projects is that I’ve learned that the flipping is never done: there’s always another way to reconsider, or reconfigure, to get as many students as possible actually producing new knowledge during class time. To be frank, these videos—the good ones—take far too long to make to be good classroom projects for most courses. I've chosen instead in my "flipped" classrooms to use that valuable class time for discussions, presentations, and, especially, manuscript projects. This means that the students Sarah W. discusses below, including herself, created their Whitman videos not during class but instead as daily homework (for very short videos of 1 minute or less); as final projects (for slightly longer videos—approximately five minutes); or as quarter-long independent studies or as paid student assistant work (for the 10-12 minutes videos).

A few main categories of work were involved in creating the longer Whitman videos:

(1) writing and editing scripts, including coming up with solid literary arguments for some of them and finding both nineteenth-century and twenty-first century images, housed on and off the Whitman Archive, that were available to use under common fair-use licensing agreements;

(2) learning how to navigate the Walt Whitman Archive (www.whitmanarchive.org); and

(3) mastering the software (Explain Everything app) and hardware (iPad) required to actually make the videos, including audio voice-overs, and

(4) "cleaning up" and posting the videos to YouTube, including captioning them for accessibility purposes.
Sample videos that show our "low-tech methods, high-quality information" ethos are available for viewing:
Whitman's Manuscripts at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vjUXgN3mvw and

Sarah: We video creators had many different responsibilities. Looking at the above list of major tasks, it's probably not surprising that some of these videos took months to make! Catherine's motto was that we were using low-tech methods to provide high-quality information, as we were not expert videographers or video editors. She believed that the script was the most important part of each video, which was why all of the video creators were advanced undergraduate majors or graduate English students. Each script went through dozens of drafts, to ensure not only that the information was accurate and that the poetic interpretations offered were legitimate and textually supported, but also that the pacing was right and the presentation lively.

Kaitlyn Morley reports that she started every script from scratch, but she didn't actually begin her work by writing:

My first duties for the Whitman videos were primarily information gathering. When we started, [Catherine] was about to go on a trip to some of the locations Whitman often visited in New York City, and she asked me to start by trying to find historical pictures or images of some of these areas [in which] he would have walked. I looked up the routes he usually walked and the locations he visited, and then used databases along with some good old-fashioned googling to find as many images along this route as I could, including the fair use information on each [image] to make sure we could use them. This was a little tricky given that there weren't a lot of photographs back then [in the nineteenth century], and a lot of the drawings or other images I could find didn't match up 1:1 with the actual locations in Brooklyn and Manhattan now. But, I did hit upon a number of really cool finds that either revealed something neat about the area or matched up exactly with our modern-day view. After [Catherine's] trip, I then turned to writing the video [script], analyzing how place and setting impacted Whitman's poems. I selected quotes from the poems that seemed to indicate this connection.
particularly well and wrote up a script, submitted it to her for review, and made revisions. (Morley)

Kaitlyn had to have the necessary knowledge and materials, especially images, to craft her scripts effectively and engagingly. She had completed an undergraduate seminar in Whitman's poetry, which helped. Sarah Horne, having taken the same seminar (in a different quarter) as well as a graduate seminar that covered Whitman, also came into the project with significant knowledge of his poetry. Her experience, like Kaitlyn's, built on this familiarity:

To create the videos, I collected various historically relevant images from the Smithsonian Institute website and the Walt Whitman Archive. I organized the video scripts by following three different lines of inquiry, one for each of my videos: Whitman and Emerson's relationship and the emergence of an American poetics; the differences between some of Whitman's manuscripts and the published works that they led to; and Whitman and the Civil War. I then wrote scripts for all three videos using specific language [that was also meant] to guide my viewers through the archive. (Horne)

The scripts were the frameworks for each Whitman video, and it wasn't until after these initial videos had been tested with students that [Catherine] realized by informally surveying her classes that most of the videos were much too long, at approximately fifteen minutes each. This is where my work editing the scripts came into the picture. Having not taken the Whitman seminar or studied Whitman extensively myself, I came into the project in a very different place from the others!

My very first role in this project was to edit existing scripts that other students already had written. The scripts had to be concise, informative, and interesting. For each script, I was tasked with cutting superfluous information, adding witty and appealing commentary and video "flair" such as sounds effects, and preserving the message and purpose of each video—in as little time as possible, as we were trying to get all videos around the ten-minute mark. While I enjoyed this task, it was sometimes uncomfortable to start with the work that other students had already completed and, on occasion, be forced to cut large portions of it for the sake of concision—especially as I knew that the scripts had been written by people who knew Whitman's work so well. I often felt reluctant to edit their words away.
Once the scripts were complete and all images gathered and verified to be available for us, we each had to actually make our videos. We used an iPad acquired via a campus grant and the app Explain Everything. None of us had ever used either an iPad or this app before! Sarah H. defines herself as "not technologically savvy in the least," and she and I both found the app, the iPad, and the other tech-related aspects of the video project (e.g. locating images online) to be straightforward and "very user friendly," albeit with a learning curve. Kaitlyn, though, identified them as potential stumbling blocks for students working on the project:

I think being technologically savvy definitely helps with creating the videos, as the more easily you can navigate unfamiliar websites and programs, the faster your research goes and the easier it is to switch between the different elements of the project. … [anyone] particularly determined and interested in learning new skills could probably manage the video… albeit more slowly" (Morley, emphasis added).

We all found that using Explain Everything entailed hours and hours of tedious work, creating individual animated slides which had to sync the words from the scripts with photos and manuscripts from the Whitman Archive and then also with our audio voice-overs. It was very challenging to craft videos that had ample academically sound information and that were engaging enough to hold student interest—especially because none of us had experience creating videos! One thing that helped is that, when I edited the existing videos, I taught myself how to insert special effects and sounds within the app, which complemented the images and manuscripts from the archive and added some zing to the viewing experience.

Perhaps the most challenging part of creating the videos was recording the audio tracks. Often, I had to re-record the same slide five or six times, because the Explain Everything app is very sensitive to outside noise. Though I would always position myself in a quiet room for recording, the smallest sounds could damage the quality of the audio track. I soon learned that if I recorded in the middle of the day while my neighbors were at work, or late at night, I had a much easier time recording, and could often effectively record a track on the first try. Kaitlyn had a similar experience, noting:
[Catherine] had shown me how to use her video-making program on her iPad and then turned it over to me to make the slideshow for the video. I combined the pictures I had found, [her] modern-day photos [of Brooklyn and Manhattan], maps of the area, images of Whitman, and clips from manuscripts for the visuals, then recorded the audio *in my bathroom of all places*—the quietest room I could find in the house! (Morley, emphasis added)

Catherine: The student video creators graciously refrained from too much complaining, both while working on the project and while being interviewed about it, but the fact is that these videos are not easy to make! Things will and do go wrong, sometimes *many* things. In fact, we dealt with every single one of Dominic McGrath et al's four drawbacks to using technology in the classroom:

- technology can (and will) fail. … ;
- technology is not automatically productive. The amount of work required to familiarize yourself and your students with a tool, troubleshoot, or provide technical support can outweigh the desired effect;
- technology can change rapidly and/or go out of date very quickly; and
- the cost of technology acquisition, deployment, and maintenance can outweigh the benefits. (McGrath et al)

To the first point: Yes, technology will fail. We had iPad login problems, Archive access problems, app stylus problems, image manipulation problems, voiceover problems (so many voiceover problems). If you can think of a tech problem, we probably had it.

To the second point: making these videos is not an efficient process. A facilitator of a flipping workshop I attended said we should plan to spend at least ten hours making every minute of video. I say: double that. Every single student worker not only had to write and revise and then revise the scripts again (and again), but each also had to be trained on the equipment, with each having a different learning curve and different strengths and challenges. Some were already very knowledgeable about Whitman but complete novices with the technology;
some were literally seeing the Whitman Archive for the first time; some discovered they were not comfortable doing voice-overs.

To the third point: by the time we finished the first videos in the series—those on using the archive, using manuscripts within the archive, Whitman in New York, Whitman and Emerson, and Whitman and the Civil War—I was completely ready to move past Explain Everything as my go-to for the project, not because it doesn't work but because there are so many additional options. Moving forward, I will be letting students choose whatever hardware and software they prefer. I'm sure that this, too, will cause its own problems. As Jihyun Lee, Cheolil Lim, and Hyeonsu Kim point out, "the more specific a model gets, the narrower the application of the model becomes" (449): in fact, we refrained from including specific information about how to use Explain Everything itself in this essay for this very reason.

And to the fourth point: these projects can be expensive. You cannot count on students having access to, say, an iPad or a snazzy voice-recording microphone for voice-overs. We were lucky to receive grant funding to purchase our equipment, and we were lucky that the students had either course credit to earn or could earn money as student assistants. Without the latter especially, I think it would be very hard to find students with the time available to volunteer their services for many hours over many months.

Sarah: It was very rewarding to realize that real students would be viewing the videos. The purpose of one video, for example, was to help students successfully navigate through the Whitman Archive on their own: how to view various texts, pictures, and manuscripts, and then how to analyze them. In order to create a truly effective video for these students, I was required to have a strong knowledge of how to navigate the archive myself. I taught myself how to access various poems, links, and other resources on the website, and then my knowledge translated right into the videos. Now, by watching the videos, the students can

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4 Sarah W. refers here to the very first video created, before we knew there would be a series. I first created a draft of this video in a summer "Flipping Your Class" workshop at my institution; Sarah later "cleaned it up," made it more visually interesting, and provided new, more smooth voice-over narration.
also learn to navigate the database, which can help them to be more successful in Catherine's class. Our institution's "Learn by Doing" process was manifested two-fold, in this sense!

Kaitlyn agrees:

It really makes a difference to your understanding and engagement with the work when you can learn about the person who wrote it and the context in which they lived, and when you can see, hear, and imagine the spaces where they would have been, the cultures they were a part of, and so on. Certain things unlock for you mentally, almost, when you are reading a poem and you can say, 'oh, I've seen that—I know what he was referring to here.' It gives you a sense of connection to the author and the work, and with Whitman particularly, since he wrote so much about reaching out to you, the reader, and connecting with you even years and years later, [looking at manuscripts] definitely feels like reaching back towards him in a kind of lovely way. I feel like I understand the man and the author a lot better by sort of putting him in context of his world, which is such a privilege. The video project absolutely inspired and changed me in terms of how I read literature, because part of my mind is always remembering now that there's a real person who lived in a real world behind the famous or published author and their works. (Morley)

Kaitlyn, Sarah H., and I agree that another benefit of the project for the video creators ourselves—as students—was our greater facility with navigating and using the vast holdings of the online Walt Whitman Archive. We all found that we agreed with Catherine that the archive's manuscript holdings are especially important. Students can see insertions, edits, and deletions in the manuscripts, and they therefore can track a poem's changes across Whitman's entire career, rather than just reading one static version (published or not) of a poem. Sarah H. was especially struck by how the manuscripts help students get beyond just the surface of literary works:

When working with literature, I typically handle hard copies of books that were printed within the last few years. When working with the archive, I could view Whitman's handwriting, his most cherished portraits, his personal copy of the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, complete with scratch marks, scribbles, and stains. Working with
these sections of the archive felt like working with my own private collection of Whitman artifacts. … I closely studied original manuscripts and constructed arguments based on my findings—a feat some Ph.D. candidates cannot boast—because of the Walt Whitman Archive. In short, I know I was made a better, more detail-oriented student because of my work with this video project and my previous work with the archive. (Horne)

While Sarah H. and Kaitlyn are now in non-teaching careers and I am a college instructor, all three of us feel that our experience working on the videos has benefited us post-graduation.

Sarah H. notes:

When creating the videos, I had to be descriptive yet concise in my language. I had to engage my audience without overwhelming them. In my career, I consistently have to rely on these skills to communicate with my colleagues and supervisors. When creating presentations in my professional life, I depend on the language skills I sharpened while working with The Walt Whitman Archive project. (Horne)

Kaitlyn’s comments reflect a different part of the project altogether—the time commitment:

https://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/call-for-submissions/

Just the sheer size of the project, looking back on it, was huge. It took us months and months to finish it, and if I had known from the start what we were looking to do when we finished, I think I would have been discouraged or overwhelmed. But doing it like we did, sort of taking it one step at a time and going "Okay, here’s what we’ve got, let’s take that and work on the next chunk of it," was really helpful. It broke it down into much smaller projects that were more manageable, and that example has helped me a lot when tackling giant projects or objectives at work. It also taught me how to really buckle down and dig in deep in terms of research, which is probably why I’m the go-to at my current company whenever my CEO needs any kind of research or information gathered. (Morley)

Like Kaitlyn and Sarah H., I felt that the videos helped me to become a better graduate student—and, later, a more successful professional. The whole process gave me an entirely new and useful method of instruction as a teacher, and I gained the confidence to create materials and activities on my own, rather than relying on pre-fabricated handouts and
assignments. By completing the video tasks, I was simultaneously learning how to craft my own writing and then my own lecture materials in a more dynamic and succinct manner. Editing the scripts to be both concise and rich with detail helped me develop my skills as a grader, helping me edit and comment on student papers. The video work—that is, actually making the slides, as painstaking as it was—gave me the confidence and ingenuity to create informative and engaging materials in a way that I never thought possible, as it pushed me to work outside of my comfort zone and create with unfamiliar methods. I now have been a lecturer for less than three years, so challenges present themselves more often than I would like; however, I feel more confident in my teaching abilities and materials because of the video project.

I will conclude by briefly discussing Mick Healey, Abbi Flint, and Kathi Harrison's observation that "some question whether students have the expertise, knowledge and experience to be fully engaged in partnership in learning and teaching" (20). This statement, more often than not, may be true: students often may not immediately have the expertise, knowledge, and experience to be successful in such a partnership. But, how will they ever gain this knowledge and expertise without dedicated faculty members trusting them enough to loosen the reins, forming partnerships in teaching and learning rather than enforcing hierarchical relationships? As a colleague in the creation of the Whitman Video Series, I felt like an apprentice educator, and this gave me the agency and ownership needed to be successful. If faculty members can trust students as not subordinates but true "partners" (as Healey, Flint, Harrison ultimately suggest), these projects can be very successful. I now try to "pay it forward" by working to partner with and advocate for my own students in the classroom, every day.
Works Cited


Morley, Kaitlyn. Interview. 10 October 2017.
