

GIS IN SMALL DOSES: INFORMATION LITERACY FIRST

—JEREMY DONALD

While Geographic Information Systems have been established in institutions of higher education since the 1990's, their adoption by the bulk of small liberal arts institutions has been surprisingly slow. Surveys show that nationally, only 29% of liberal arts schools provide any kind of GIS support—and that includes offering web access to free GIS sites. The numbers for GIS support by academic libraries are, predictably, worse: only 13% support GIS, and that number has fallen due to lack of use.

The Coates Library supports GIS, and wants to promote its use across campus. As the GIS liaison, I administer the software, collect GIS data, and provide information literacy instruction centered on GIS as a teaching and learning tool in all disciplines. I will help you develop an application of GIS for an existing course, or put you on the path to becoming skilled enough with the software to realize a broader vision of GIS in your teaching and research.

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At the Coates Library, GIS is treated like any other subject: GIS-related literature is cataloged in the library's collection under the appropriate Library of Congress Subject Headings; GIS software and the GIS lab computers are given the careful support, maintenance, and access that any other license-based data tool (i.e., Bloomberg) would receive; a library subject webpage on GIS has its place among those of the other subjects, and information literacy instruction on GIS (for students and faculty) is offered as it would be for any other subject.

This last item—information literacy instruction for GIS—has been the cornerstone of the push toward making GIS-based learning objects a part of the Trinity University curriculum for as many

departments as possible. As a reference/instruction librarian, I was trained to teach students not just how to find information, but how ask and answer questions about information, from its source to the quality of the content and

GIS at the library:

- **We have it**
- **We'll get you started and help you find training and data**
- **We'll help you teach students to use it in assignments and projects**

ultimately its relevance to their work. I believe this approach will work with GIS as well, as many of the issues are the same. The real problem is getting it into the curriculum and in front of students.

To that end, the library has worked to raise the profile of GIS on campus. Incorporating equal parts promotion, training, and recruitment, this outreach has taken the form of programming special faculty-only GIS sessions, for both general and specialized audiences. For example, to create a special presentation for the Business & Marketing and Economics faculty, I worked with local ESRI educational reps to do a demonstration of Business Analyst. This involved demonstrating the library's online GIS data directory, pitching my services as a liaison, and stressing the approach of creating scaled GIS assignments and projects to work into existing courses.

Reaching out to non-users is meant to develop interest in more advanced training and workshop opportunities like those offered by the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE,) as well as to generate business for the GIS librarian. As a result of faculty attending two different NITLE workshops in the company of the GIS

librarian and, in one case, Biology research assistant Rebecca Hazen, during the summer of 2005, several significant GIS modules will be included in the spring 2006 curriculum. One is a project involving GPS and a tree census, which will be a lab activity as part of a lower-division Biology course called Methods for Biological Problem Solving. Others include a voting analysis project involving election returns and Census demographic data at the precinct level, and an exercise in creating county election districts that explores various models of minority representation for a Political Science course offered by Tucker Gibson.

The emphasis in these collaborations is always on outcomes: what are students to learn in the course, and how can an application of GIS—at a reasonable scale—enhance their learning? The ever-present risk that a GIS module will turn into a time-eating over-commitment can always be addressed with the basic principles and practices of information literacy instruction:

- **Start with an analysis of desired outcomes;**
- **match these to available content resources;**
- **find a way to present it interactively and engage students;**
- **impart transferable skills in the process.**

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For more information or to get started on planning use of GIS in your courses, contact Librarian Jeremy Donald, ext. 8176, jdonald@trinity.edu

PASSION, CREATIVE PROCESS...AND THE LIBRARY

—SAM CARTER GILLIAM, DEPT. OF SPEECH & DRAMA

First Year Seminar students in “Passion, Creative Process and the Arts” explore the process of creative development and expression through the experiences and wisdom of artists who have made the journey. Digging into the reading list, harnessing critical thinking skills in discussion and composing essays can only take one so far. To more fully understand the implications of the creative process and the effort required to see an endeavor to its public end, one must make the journey: ride out the not-knowing and the mistakes, and find the patience to persevere in order to enjoy the “aha!” moments that announce the breakthroughs.

“The journey IS the destination.” “Respect the process; it will not let you down.” These are not easily understood in the abstract and certainly mean very little if only spoken by the instructor! Nice sayings, lovely to look at, but that’s about as far as it goes—unless you’ve lived it. So, the final project in this section of FYS is entitled, “Museum Piece.” Inspired by a graduate seminar in the performance program at the University of Cincinnati, “Museum Piece” is a creative journey, rooted in historical research. Research grounds an imaginative vision inspired by a painting and brings to life a character, a story and a presentation that celebrates the artist/scholar in the student and art in the making. In an effort to deepen visual literacy, students search for and choose a painting that intrigues them and invites them into its world. Each painting is carefully scrutinized. The development of an original story on the life of a character who lives in the world of the painting (but is not seen) becomes the major objective of this project.

Essentially, “Museum Piece” is comprised of four tasks. The first task requires the student to choose a painting, write a brief “infomercial” about the artist, the image, a bit of background and present this to the class. The second task requires research into the historical details embedded in the world of the painting itself: environmental, social, political, religious. With substantive research, the student begins to “walk in the world of the painting,” to imagine the life and begin to inhabit a

character who lives in this world. With historical context in place, the development of an original character becomes a marriage of research and imagination. The third task, then, is to write a



“Memory Cup” in the voice of this imagined character. This story is often a memory in which a creative calling announces itself and the implications of following that calling are explored. Obstacles present themselves, conflicts deepen, and choices must be made.

The fourth and final task is a formal presentation of this creative journey. The student displays the painting, the source of inspiration for this project. Based on the research conducted and the work of developing an original character, the student presents a narrative commentary of her process, coupled with an oral reading or performance of the character’s memory cup. Music is often used to underscore mood, environment and historical period. Appropriate food and drink have been served! Costume is often a delightful addition. PowerPoint is used judiciously to support the main narrative commentary. The student is center stage, in full focus. She must own her material. He must compel us to listen. She must draw us into the world of the painting. He must engage us with story. The imagination is challenged, if not liberated, and the artist in the student comes alive—more often than not.

Reference Librarian Benjamin Harris:

Library research is necessary during three of these four phases. Early in the

semester, students visit the library for an instruction session to complete an earlier assignment. University Librarian Diane Graves and I conduct this session together. This initial meeting allows them to develop some familiarity with the library and its resources as well as the librarians.

When students are introduced to the “Museum Piece” project, we make a second visit to the classroom to discuss locating images and to assist in presenting examples of images. We also attend the next class session during which students present the images they will use for the assignment. This allows us an opportunity to evaluate student learning and I must admit, we enjoy seeing students’ selections and hearing about their research experience.

As their instructor requires students to locate copies of their images in the library’s print collection, students may ask for assistance or may use a course related guide as they conduct their search. Then, students may require assistance when locating information about the image and its history. Finally, students are encouraged to make research appointments with us when they conduct searches related to the historical context represented in the image (as this may differ from the times during which the image was produced).

While the “Museum Piece” assignment clearly allows students to develop and experiment with a variety of learning strategies and activities, it also requires the use of a variety of different materials and search strategies. The sequence of the assignment builds on student learning as it reinforces information literacy skills acquisition.

To create or revise assignments that integrate the critical thinking, writing, and library research processes, please contact your liaison librarian.

Sam Carter Gilliam is an Instructor in Trinity’s Speech and Drama Department and teaches this seminar each semester.