

## Digital literacy

Christopher Donaldson and Zoe Alker

Showing one's workings is, it turns out, a Victorian practice. Querying the *OED Online* proves the phrase was in circulation as early as the 1870s, and searching *Google Books* affirms that it was used in the puzzle pages of Annie Besant's *Our Corner* in the following decade. 'You should show your working of arithmetical puzzles,' warns the *Our Corner* puzzler, 'or you lose many marks.'<sup>1</sup> Many of us will have first encountered some variation of this admonition writ large on our maths homework. But even at more than a century's remove from the puzzle pages' publication, the aim of the injunction remains the same: to make us responsible for both the ends and means of our work.

Many of us are no doubt glad to be excused from having to prove geometric theorems. Still, the basic approach to problem solving that our maths teachers tried to instil in us remains imperative to our lives as students of Victorian history and culture. We all know that we should carefully consider the fitness of our methods to our sources, and that we should document the steps we take in our research. We know, furthermore, that we should understand and be accountable for the means by which the knowledge we create is stored and shared. We should, in other words, be literate in the languages and systems that structure the intellectual and academic environments in which we work.

It is surprising, then, to recognize how complacent many of us are about the digitally aided modes of evidence collection, analysis and publication on which we rely. Whether wittingly or not, many of us take for granted the digital resources we use to create and disseminate knowledge. Many of us, moreover, stop short of interrogating how those resources work, who owns them and how they influence our scholarship. In an age in which more and more of the knowledge we create is digitally stored, managed

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Show, v. P19.', *OED Online* <<http://www.oed.com>> [search for 'show your working' at 15:15, 4 January 2019]; 'Puzzles', *Our Corner*, IV (1884), 64, *Google Books* <[https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=%22show+your+working%22&tbm=bks&source=ln&tbs=cd:r:1,cd\\_min:1800,cd\\_max:1899](https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=%22show+your+working%22&tbm=bks&source=ln&tbs=cd:r:1,cd_min:1800,cd_max:1899)> [search for 'show your working' with 19<sup>th</sup> century filter at 15:19, Accessed at 4 January 2019].

and sold by commercial providers, we need to be ever more scrupulous not only about accounting for our academic work, but also about understanding the resources on which that work depends. Where possible, moreover, we need to assert our claim to control the means by which our work is produced and reproduced.

This latter point lies at the core of the article that opens this instalment of the Digital Forum: Dino Franco Felluga and David Rettenmaier's 'Can Victorian Studies Reclaim the Means of Production?'. Felluga and Rettenmaier's work on *The Central Online Victorian Educator* (COVE) will be known to many readers of JVC. Here the two scholars present an extended contribution which considers the difficulties that have resulted from the increasing consolidation of scholarship in digital databases managed by large commercial publishers. 'Part of the problem', Felluga and Rettenmaier contend, 'is that we are not in control of the means of production, nor do we control either the cultural capital or the real capital that allows presses to stay in the black, purchasing the products of our labor for next to nothing and then selling them back to us in expensive products'.<sup>2</sup> Expounding on the principles that have informed The COVE, Felluga and Rettenmaier proceed to affirm how alternative forms of open-access, open-source digital publication can stimulate new kinds of academic practice that empower scholars by placing the means of digital knowledge creation in their hands.

A key aspect of academic practice on which Felluga and Rettenmaier touch is the importance of embedding such literacy into our pedagogy. The other two contributions to the current Forum demonstrate how this ideal can be put into action. In her contribution, Kate Holterhoff reflects on the opportunities that her work as editor of *Visual Haggard* have afforded her in the classroom. *Visual Haggard* is a digital archive that contains an exceptionally rich corpus of more than 2,000 illustrations that appeared in various editions of the novels of H. Rider Haggard. The content of these illustrations, as Holterhoff emphasises, often runs contrary to the ethical sensibilities of modern readers, and this makes this material especially difficult subject matter for the undergraduate classroom. As Holterhoff explains, working with *Visual Haggard* empowered her students to engage critically and directly with potentially offensive historical materials while simultaneously developing their data-management and visualisation skills.

---

<sup>2</sup> Add reference to Felluga and Rettenmaier's article once proofs are set.

Lindsay Lawrence strikes a similar chord in her article, which rounds off this instalment of the Forum. Lawrence, a co-founder of the *Periodical Poetry Index*, discusses the value of using this extensive database of nineteenth-century periodical poetry in the undergraduate classroom. She reveals how this resource enables students to work with primary sources and to develop an understanding of nineteenth-century periodicals in ways that are otherwise not possible at institutions without access to relevant materials through a local special-collections library. In addition to providing such access, as Lawrence explains, working with the *Periodical Poetry Index* supports her students in developing not only a more integral understanding of the media-situation of Victorian periodical poetry, but also in shaping their digital literacy skills in a more concerted and holistic manner. ‘Digital literacy,’ as Lawrence suggests, ‘is best practiced all at once, with students engaging in the skills of browsing, searching, hyper reading and roaming, alongside critical analysis and participating in building something rather than learning these skills discretely.’<sup>3</sup> This integrated approach to digital Victorian studies complements initiatives like COVE and, like Holterhoff’s work with *Visual Haggard*, it encourages students to take account of how the methods and resources of digital scholarship are intertwined.

Collectively, then, the contributors to this Forum provoke reflection on how we can take responsibility for our engagement with digital modes of production. Such reflection is essential if we are to adhere to the standards of good practice espoused by the *Our Corner* puzzler in being accountable for both the ends and means of our work.

Dr Christopher Donaldson, University of Lancaster,

Email: [c.e.donaldson@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:c.e.donaldson@lancaster.ac.uk).

Dr Zoe Alker, University of Liverpool, E-mail: [Z.Alker@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:Z.Alker@liverpool.ac.uk).

---

<sup>3</sup> Add reference to Lawrence’s article once proofs are set.