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## THE DIGITAL CLASSROOM: NEW SOCIAL MEDIA AND TEACHING VICTORIAN CRIME

Zoe Alker<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article explores the implications of student blogging in undergraduate crime history module, *Prison Voices: Crime, Conviction and Confession 1700-1900*. Public blogging as assessment trains students to become creators as well as users of digital content, and encourages a more active engagement in research participation and knowledge exchange. But while this model of learning is highly rewarding for students, it also highlights pedagogical challenges relating to digital literacy, comparability with traditional assessment forms, and institutional support. This paper will evaluate these issues whilst promoting wider reflection on 'blogging beyond the classroom'.

**Keywords:** digital humanities, blogging as undergraduate assessment, pedagogy, public histories of crime, prison voices

### Introduction

Recent developments in digital technology have fundamentally changed the ways in which we approach academic, archival, and public histories of crime. Not only has digitisation altered the ways that we research crime history, it has also affected the ways in which historians and heritage professionals communicate their research.<sup>2</sup> Collaboration between the academy and public and commercial sector is becoming an integral part of research culture and public engagement, and University and arts and heritage professionals face increasing demand to work together to ensure the long-term preservation of digitised collections and generate new projects. In recent years crime historians have demonstrated the potential work that can be produced as a result of collaboration between the academy and arts and heritage organisations whether through digitisation, television, radio, popular histories, plays or in the development of museum collections.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more on how digitisation has affected historical research and practice, see T. Hitchcock, 'Academic History Writing and its Disconnects', *Journal of Digital Humanities*, 1(1) (2011), <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/academic-history-writing-and-its-disconnects-by-tim-hitchcock/> [Accessed on 30 April 2014].

<sup>3</sup> Notable examples include, for digitisation: The Digital Panopticon: The Global Impact of London Punishments, 1780-1925 (2014) <http://www.digitalpanopticon.org/>; *The Old Bailey Proceedings Online, 1674-1913* (24 March 2012) <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/>; *Locating*

Social media platforms including blogs have, in many ways, played a significant part in converging the once disparate fields of academic and public history. Crime historians are turning to blogging as a way to share their research more widely and exchange ideas and resources with multiple audiences. Crime history blogs have multiplied in recent years.<sup>4</sup> Social media encompasses blogging sites, Facebook, Pinterest and Twitter, which facilitate ongoing conversations between heritage professionals and academics in virtual space. These sites are not only tools for publicising research, but cultivate ways of building dialogue, exchanging resources and gaining feedback; in short, 'It becomes a way of thinking in public and revising ones work, to make it better, in public.'<sup>5</sup> Tim Hitchcock recently described this virtual community as 'an academic public sphere.'<sup>6</sup> The appropriation of Habermas' term is an effective one; online communities transcend geographical boundaries and dismantle traditional 'offline' hierarchies 'separating amateur and professional, young and old, new and established, theorist and practitioner, reader and writer.'<sup>7</sup>

Yet to date there has been little discussion about the role that students can play in the online academic public sphere. In this short article I argue that using new media in the classroom can transform the ways in which undergraduate students' research produce crime history. Previously students' encounters with primary sources, at least until they reached dissertation level, were limited to material gathered from trips to

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*London's Past* (December, 2011) <http://www.locatinglondon.org/>; *Connected Histories* (2014) <http://www.connectedhistories.org/>; *Founders and Survivors: Australian Life Courses in Historical Context 1803-1920* (2014) <http://foundersandsurvivors.org/>. Television: *Who Do You Think You Are* (BBC, 2004), *Secrets of the Clink* (ITV, 2014). Radio: 'Voices from the Old Bailey', (BBC Radio 4, 2010). Popular books: Andrew Davies, *Gangs of Manchester: The Story of the Scuttlers, Britain's First Youth Cult* (Preston: Milo Books, 2008). Plays: Andrew Davies's *Gangs of Manchester* was adapted for theatre in 2009. P. Cliff, *Angels with Manky Faces* (MaD Theatre Company, 2009). Museum Collections: Prison Voices (2013) [blog] <http://www.prisonvoices.org/>; Writing Lives (2013) [blog] <http://www.writinglives.org/> [Accessed on 15 August, 2014].

<sup>4</sup> Nell Darby, *Criminal Historian: Working with Dead People*, <http://criminalhistorian.com/>; Helen Rogers, *Conviction: Stories from a nineteenth-century prison* <http://convictionblog.com/>; Guy Woolnough, *Victorian Policing: Bottom up history. What happened at street level* <http://www.guywoolnough.com/>; Lucy Williams, *Wayward Women* <http://www.waywardwomen.wordpress.com> [Accessed on 15 August, 2014].

<sup>5</sup> Tim Hitchcock, 'Doing it in public: Impact, blogging, social media and the academy', (15 July, 2014) <http://historyonics.blogspot.co.uk/> [Accessed 20 July 2014].

<sup>6</sup> <http://historyonics.blogspot.co.uk> [Accessed 20 July 2014]. For Habermas's original definition of the public sphere see Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Helen Rogers, 'Blogging our criminal past part 2: History turned upside down' (18 August 2014), <http://convictionblog.com/2014/08/21/blogging-our-criminal-past-part-2-history-turned-upside-down/> [Accessed 21 August 2014]. For Habermas' original definition of the public sphere see Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1991).

their local archives and libraries, references in secondary works or photocopies from lecturers' own collections. The pre-digital era for historians led to, as John Clymer put it, 'a pedagogy of scarcity.'<sup>8</sup> In a recent talk for the Our Criminal Past series, Peter D'Sena rightly contended that there is still a place in education for offline archival research and field trips.<sup>9</sup> But the digitisation of crime sources from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries means that it has never been easier for students to locate narratives of crime and punishment and carry out their own research. Encouraging students to take a 'hands on' approach to learning shifts them from being passive consumers of knowledge and empowers them to become active, independent researchers and producers. In addition, by incorporating social media forms such as blogging and microblogging in to teaching programmes, we are enabling students to become a part of the digital public sphere, gain vital digital literacy skills, and collaborate in the process of preserving our criminal past.

The availability of online databases continues to grow and expand, and as a result, lecturers and teachers need to consider how pedagogy reflects research practices in their field. In 2003 Roy Rosenzweig, founder of the [Centre for History and New Media](#) at George Mason University, warned that, 'historians need to be thinking simultaneously about how to research, write, and teach in a world of unheard-of historical abundance.'<sup>10</sup> Indeed George Landow, founder of the well-respected site, [Victorian Web](#), noted that,

This freedom to inquire turns the traditional relationship between student and teacher on its head, because with essentially unlimited access to historical information - for good or ill -students are no longer dependent upon their teachers for access to information that was once doled out to them.<sup>11</sup>

Here I argue that that, by allowing students to use digital archives and post their work online, we are equipping them with key skills that reflect current research practice in the Humanities as well as increasing their employability in an increasingly competitive graduate job market. Though this piece specifically focuses upon the teaching of crime history in higher education, the pedagogical

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<sup>8</sup> John McClymer, *The AHA Guide to Teaching and Learning With New Media* (American Historical Association, 2005), 4–5.

<sup>9</sup> Peter D'Sena, 'The Future of Teaching Our Criminal Past in Higher Education', <http://www.ourcriminalpast.co.uk/programme-6-september/abstracts2/> [Accessed 14 July, 2014].

<sup>10</sup> Roy Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired: The Future of the Past in the Digital Age* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 100-101.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.victorianweb.org/cv/gplbio.html> [Accessed 15 August, 2014].

principles that relate to the use of digital technology in the classroom has the potential to reach a wide range of subjects and levels.

This article is split into four sections. In the first section, I will introduce the content and assessment in undergraduate module, *Prison Voices: Crime, Conviction and Confession 1780-1900*. In part two, I will evaluate the merits and limitations of teaching digital humanities; in doing so I discuss how incorporating digital and social media in undergraduate teaching can empower students to be active users and collaborators in historical research. The need to train students in digital technology is considered in part three, and finally, the article highlights the value of collaborative learning for students and the wider community.

## **1 Prison Voices: Crime, Conviction and Confession 1780-1900**

From 2010 to 2013, I co-taught on a research-led module with Dr Helen Rogers called *Prison Voices: Crime, Conviction and Confession, 1780-1900* (hereafter *Prison Voices*). The module is open to level five students from Liverpool John Moores University's (LJMU) English, History and Media Studies programmes, and each year around 50 students enrol for the year-long course. The module explores a broad range of writings on the subject of crime and punishment in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The period under study saw profound transformation both in the idea of the offender and in the organisation of punishment from the punitive system of hard bed, hard fare and hard work to the reform and rehabilitation of prisoners that characterised modern punishment.<sup>12</sup> On the module we explore these changing discourses about criminality and discipline and consider how they have been articulated within literary and non-literary writings. We interrogate real and imagined prison voices examining, for instance, the emergence of the novel with the birth of Moll Flanders at Newgate alongside the Old Bailey trials, criminal confessions and execution broadsides that Daniel Defoe drew upon. By tracing shifts in the experience and representation of the convicted, the module aims to recover the voice of the prisoner through a wide range of online source material including prison memoirs, criminal confessions, newspapers, court reports, tattoos and graffiti.

Due to the experimental nature of the module, the ways in which students have been assessed on *Prison Voices* has undergone changes from year to year. Initially, Helen and I asked students to provide research proposals, blogs and wikis using LJMU's

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<sup>12</sup> M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Vintage, 1977).

virtual learning environment (VLE), Blackboard. But in 2013, we received funding from the Higher Education Academy to develop a website, [PrisonVoices.org](http://PrisonVoices.org), to showcase students' work on the module.<sup>13</sup> The award meant that we could integrate blogging as the main form of assessment and the majority of their written work now consists of blog posts published on the site. Assessment for the module consists of two major components, each involving several elements. A series of three blog posts and the collation of an online source pack comprise 70% of the mark. Students are asked to complete two 1,500 word research posts on topics including: Victorian ideas about juvenile crime in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1838), the representation of the criminal body in the Newgate executions, or narratives of 'repentant' selves in the last dying speeches of the condemned. In addition they post a 500 word evaluation on the site where they offer critical reflections on their use of digital archives, their role as collaborators in the research and their assessments of blogging for a public audience.<sup>14</sup> 30% of the module mark is awarded for research collaboration. Students are rewarded for their workshop attendance and performance in group work. This is assessed by students' completion of research diaries which record their research, their work on maintaining the website, and their commitment to disseminating their posts through social media, museums, archives and the press.

The incorporation of digital and social media in *Prison Voices* has several purposes. Firstly, students often rely upon the internet as the starting point of their research. Instructing students to evaluate the authority of online material is an increasingly vital skill for current and future humanities students. Secondly, blog posts demand a shorter word length than the essay format so students can submit their work more frequently throughout the year. This allows them to practise sharpening their prose, manage chunks of reading and research, and receive regular feedback throughout the year.<sup>15</sup> Their posts are formally assessed by module tutors, and students are credited on their level of critical analysis, how they determine the authority of primary sources and how they respond to historiographical debates. And, as the blogs are posted online (the posts are not made public until they have been formally

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<sup>13</sup> HEA Teaching Development Grant, 'Students as partners in online research collaboration and knowledge exchange' awarded to Helen Rogers (Liverpool John Moores University, 2013-14).

<sup>14</sup> Student evaluation posts can be found here: <http://www.prisonvoices.org/?cat=1> [Accessed 25 August, 2014].

<sup>15</sup> For further discussion on blogs and historiography see Melodie Beals, 'Historiographical blogging: Reintegrating unassessed writing into the undergraduate curriculum', <http://mhbeals.com/historiographical-blogging-re-integrating-unassessed-writing-into-the-undergraduate-curriculum/> [Accessed 10 July 2014].

assessed), they are monitored by classmates and teachers alike. Modules which incorporate blog posts can support conjoining humanities modules that adopt essay-type assessments by giving students vital experience in writing for different audiences - both academic and popular. By learning how to use social media through practice, they learn vital skills for future employment and are instructed about 'netiquette' and the importance of their digital footprint. Finally, students are encouraged to further contribute to public engagement and knowledge exchange by showcasing their work through social media, collaborating with arts and heritage practitioners and establishing contacts with relevant cultural organisations such as museums, archives and press.

## 2 The Digital Classroom: Students as Users and Producers

The digitisation of Hanoverian and Victorian crime resources such as [Old Bailey Online](#), [Locating London's Past](#), British Library's [19th Century Newspapers Online](#), Bodleian's [Criminal BroadSides](#) and [Founders and Survivors](#), has proved invaluable in teaching a research-led module such as *Prison Voices*. The ability to undertake digital record linkage in the classroom means that students can explore this rich material in class and create original and innovative research projects. Experimenting with digital archives means that the classroom 'becomes the archive'.<sup>16</sup>

However we have little understanding, so far, of how these digital collections are used by teachers, researchers and heritage professionals. 'My sense is that most are woefully underused' writes Helen Rogers, 'Many academics are more concerned to get funding to create new digital resources rather than work with what is already available.'<sup>17</sup> Incorporating social media into the classroom means that student blog posts can showcase the interesting and often overlooked material that these collections hold. *Prison Voices* (2013) student Aaron Molyneux's blog post about 11 year old Mary Wade, who was sentenced to hang at the Old Bailey in 1789 for the robbery of one cotton frock and a linen tippet and cap, is an example of this. Aaron drew upon a variety of online resources including trial transcripts from the [Old Bailey Online](#), newspaper reports in [The Times Digital Archive](#) as well as the [Mary Wade Family Association](#). His work proved popular online with both academic and non-academic readers: '[Mary Wade: The Crime and Punishment of Britain's Youngest](#)

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<sup>16</sup> Bob Nicholson, 'Digital Detectives: Bridging the gap between the archive and the classroom' [blog] <http://www.digitalvictorianist.com/2014/04/talk-digital-detectives-bridging-gap-archive-classroom/> [Accessed 22 August 2014].

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=46> [Accessed 1 August 2014].

[Transportee](#)' has already been re-posted five times, and received 14 Facebook 'likes' and 26 retweets on Twitter. His posts have also featured on the popular historical website, [Executed Today](#).<sup>18</sup>

By putting students' work in the public domain, argue Rogers and Hitchcock, students are forced to confront the demands of writing for a 'real' public audience. By embedding blogs in undergraduate assignments we are, says Hitchcock,

forcing students to write 'publicly', [so] their writing rapidly improves. From being characterised by the worst kind of bad academic prose- all passive voice pomposity - undergraduate writing in blogs is frequently transformed in to something more engaging, simply written and to the point.<sup>19</sup>

A similar pattern emerged from the Prison Voices (2013-14) cohort who, 'grasp very quickly the importance of creating reliable and professional resources because- by going public - they are putting their own work and reputation, and their University on the line.'<sup>20</sup> Humanities subjects tend to train students to write for a specific audience- that is, their lecturers and teachers - but blogging encourages students to write for multiple readerships. As James Mussell explains, students not only gain valuable writing skills, but experience with social media instructs them in the importance of 'netiquette'. 'Participating in ongoing discussions online means that students gain first-hand experience of writing for different audiences, as well as the different forms of discourse- what used to be called 'netiquette' - appropriate to online discussion.'<sup>21</sup>

There are tensions between traditional forms of academic writing such as essays, and the use of blogs in undergraduate assessments is subject to ongoing debate.<sup>22</sup> Plagiarism in particular is a pressing concern, but the digital environment enables teachers to police the imitation of scholarly work more effectively. The publication of books and articles on [Google Scholar](#) means that it is much easier to search and locate transcribed material than ever before. In addition, Virtual Learning

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<sup>18</sup> A. Molyneux, 'Mary Wade: The Crime and Punishment of British Youngest Transportee', <http://www.prisonvoices.org/?p=528> [Accessed 20 August, 2014].

<sup>19</sup> <http://historyonics.blogspot.co.uk/> [Accessed 15 August, 2014].

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=46> [Accessed 1 August 2014].

<sup>21</sup> James Mussell, 'Blogging about hacking the book', *Journal of Victorian Culture Online* (August, 2012) [blog] <http://myblogs.informa.com/jvc/2012/08/20/blogging-about-hacking-the-book/> [Accessed 19 August 2014].

<sup>22</sup> Nicole Ellison, & Yuehua Wu, (2008). 'Blogging in the Classroom: A Preliminary Exploration of Student Attitudes and Impact on Comprehension', *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, 17(1), 99-122. <http://historyonics.blogspot.co.uk/> [Accessed 15 August, 2014]. Kathleen Gray, Celia Thompson, Judith Sheard, Rosemary Clerehan, and Margaret Hamilton (2010). Students as Web 2.0 authors: Implications for assessment design and conduct. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 26(1), 105-122.



Environments have mechanisms in place to support the detection of copied material. On *Prison Voices* we adopted a three-tiered procedure to ensure that students avoided plagiarism. Firstly, students are required to sign an academic misconduct statement which declares that all non-cited material is their own and acknowledges their awareness of the penalties if they were to commit academic misconduct. Secondly, each student has to submit their blog posts on Turnitin, available through LJMU's VLE, before publication online. Turnitin, an online service which supports online marking and the checking of originality, allows us to track any plagiarised material. Students also act as peer reviewers. The sharing of blog posts within allocated student groups means that they are able to police both their own work and those of others which acts as a barrier to the academic theft of each other's work. Indeed the [Prison Voices](#) website itself acts as an archive of work from previous and current years meaning that the replication of other students' work is more easily detectable than when work is submitted through hard copy.

Others are fearful that blogs, in their readable, popular format, fail to maintain the academic interrogation that a longer, wordier essay can provide.<sup>23</sup> But rather than replace the essay, blogs invite students to foreground the analysis of primary sources and construct arguments in different, but no less thorough, ways. James Mussell sees the way in which we ask students to submit their work as particularly problematic for the traditional, word-processed essay restricts the potential of students' work.<sup>24</sup> He views the ways in which we ask students to submit work as a pressing issue, ‘

A more imaginative approach to assessment, such as producing work in electronic formats, is required to complement those forms that are already institutionalised within the academy and so incorporate a wider range of literacies into formal assessment.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly blogs - with their ability to host links, images, video and audio files - have more room for creativity than the established essay format. Essays instruct students to do a number of things well: form logical arguments, rank sources and organise complex ideas into a readable structure; blogs also provide these skills but correspondingly invite students to re-present their critical arguments by

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<sup>23</sup>This issue arose during discussions at the second sessions of the Our Criminal Past series. 'Our Criminal Past: Educating Historians of Crime: Classroom, Archive, Community', Our Criminal Past, unpublished conference discussion, Leeds Metropolitan University, 6 September, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> James Mussell, *The Nineteenth-century Press in the Digital Age* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 186.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 186.

experimenting with images, fonts and backgrounds. In doing so, students can explore different ways of constructing crime histories. For example, in '[Take this not amiss: Poetry in convict love tokens](#)', *Prison Voices* student Elliot McGaffney highlights the critical importance of convict relationships and supports his argument with images of transportation hulks, conduct records and convict love tokens.<sup>26</sup> The images provide readers with a visible reference point to his analysis adding strength to his reasoning as well as demonstrating his ability to produce creative and visually appealing content. In addition student blogging is especially pertinent given that academic journals are moving their content online as many shift to open access. By learning to create multi-media posts, students are gaining skills which reflect current scholarly publishing and gain useful experience relevant to the graduate job market.

It is vital that students do not get too caught up in primary source material and ground their work in historical debates. History is, after all, an 'ongoing conversation - you need to know what's already been said.'<sup>27</sup> Bob Nicholson, otherwise known as [The Digital Victorianist](#), recently reflected on his use of digital technology in his undergraduate History course, 'Digital Detectives', which he runs at Edge Hill University. In the post, Nicholson outlined his concerns about how teaching his students to use digital archives left little time for reflecting upon historiographical debates.<sup>28</sup> *Prison Voices* ran weekly three-hour sessions which allowed us time to work with the digital collections but also reflect on historiography. Yet teaching schedules are inconsistent both between and within University departments. Many follow the format of an hour-long lecture followed by an hour-long seminar which is likely too short a time frame to be able to adopt a research-led model. But as Nicholson explains, undergraduate seminars have tended to focus too heavily on discussing historiographical debates at the expense of providing students with the opportunities to pursue their own research. In doing so 'we treat them as consumers rather than producers of knowledge.'<sup>29</sup>

The major obstacles to teaching new media in undergraduate courses lie in the ways that classes are facilitated. Current provisions for how we teach lectures and

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<sup>26</sup> Elliott McGaffney, 'Take this not amiss: Poetry in convict love tokens', <http://www.prisonvoices.org/?p=690> [Accessed 10 August 2014].

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.digitalvictorianist.com/2014/04/talk-digital-detectives-bridging-gap-archive-classroom/> [Accessed 22 August 2014].

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.digitalvictorianist.com/2014/04/talk-digital-detectives-bridging-gap-archive-classroom/> [Accessed 22 August 2014].

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.digitalvictorianist.com/2014/04/talk-digital-detectives-bridging-gap-archive-classroom/> [Accessed 22 August 2014].

seminars, that is, lecture theatres or small meeting rooms, reflects teaching and learning in the pre-digital era and means that students are often listeners and speakers rather than doers. Yet the contemporary digital landscape means that the shift in pedagogy to an increasingly active, 'hands on' learning environment means that institutions need to support the availability of resources including making IT suites available and allocating time in the schedule to be able to teach digital humanities classes. A recent study carried out by Helen Beetham and David White measured student expectations of Universities' ICT facilities. High on the agenda were to gain 'explicit instruction in using institutional systems and specialist technologies required for their course' and that, 'technology [be] incorporated into their teaching/learning in ways that are relevant to their academic success.'<sup>30</sup> But access to rooms with IT services can be problematic. Timetabling conflicts means that an ICT suite is often not available, especially for the full semester or academic year, but the use of one-off or multiple IT sessions are a way to overcome this.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, University and library access to online subscriptions tend to be sporadic. Nicholson urges scholars to integrate digital resources 'more fully' into our teaching to put forward a stronger case for purchasing additional subscriptions:

This kind of investment is important...In the absence of the fancy new laboratories and TV studios bestowed on other subjects, access to an extensive digital archive is the least our students deserve.<sup>32</sup>

### 3 The Google Generation: Digital Natives?

In 2001 Marc Prensky claimed that the 'Google Generation', shorthand for students born after 1993, were 'digital natives'; 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet. By contrast, teachers and those born before 1980 were 'digital immigrants'-users' who have come to learn new technologies later in life so do not adapt to them with the same ease as their younger counterparts.<sup>33</sup> For Prensky, education was the area in which the 'digital divide' between generations was most pressing; teachers were not equipped to teach their

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<sup>30</sup> H. Beetham and D. White, *Student's expectations and experiences of the digital environment* (JISC, 2013), 5. See [digitalstudent.jiscinvolve.org](http://digitalstudent.jiscinvolve.org) to follow the next stage of this research.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.digitalvictorianist.com/2014/04/talk-digital-detectives-bridging-gap-archive-classroom/> [Accessed 22 August 2014].

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.digitalvictorianist.com/2014/04/talk-digital-detectives-bridging-gap-archive-classroom/> [Accessed 22 August 2014].

<sup>33</sup> Marc Prensky, 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants' (October, 2011), <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf> [Accessed 1 July, 2014]. Also see M. Prensky, *On the Horizon*, MCB University Press, 9, (5) (2007), 1-6.

more capable young counterparts and Prensky recommended that scholars create new ways of instructing digital natives.

The myth of 'digital natives' has been dismantled in recent scholarship. Later studies have shown, for example, that while young people use digital media more frequently, there is little disparity between students and educators in how effectively they use them.<sup>34</sup> A report by CIBER in 2008 showed that whilst young people were confident in using computers, they did not possess the critical and analytical skills to evaluate web-based information.<sup>35</sup> Helen Rogers' 2013 survey of 25 students taking her [Writing Lives](#) module found that only two students were bloggers.<sup>36</sup> I noticed a similar pattern amongst 30 *Prison Voices* students in 2012, only one blogged and very few were active on Twitter. Facebook was the site they used most often and, while many had concerns about privacy, they had given little thought to their online presence or their 'digital footprint'. *Prison Voices* (2013) student, Sarah Murphy, said,

I had used social media before but only for personal use, like telling everyone what I had for breakfast. However I have learnt that social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest can be used to educate and inform.<sup>37</sup>

They had no awareness of debates over their digital footprint or the relevance of the digital public sphere.<sup>38</sup> Most did not know how to evaluate the authority of web material or distinguish between scholarly and popular sites:

They had to learn that blogging is a distinctive medium requiring different forms of writing and presentation to traditional academic essays. Importantly, they had to learn to write for a public audience.<sup>39</sup>

Helen Rogers suggests that 'digital apprentices' is a more suitable way of describing students and teachers of Digital Humanities and encourages educators to embed ICT training in their teaching programmes.<sup>40</sup> Digital literacy is at the centre of students' interests both as future employees and as cultural citizens. At present, however, very little time is being dedicated to providing students with guidance in using online media. Nadine Muller, a lecturer at LJMU, has recently established an advisory blog, [Social Media Skills for Students](#), as she realised that there was 'fairly little space

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<sup>34</sup> Sonia Livingstone and Ellen Helsper, 'Gradations in digital inclusion: children, young people and the digital divide', *New Media & Society*, 9(4) (2007), 671-696.

<sup>35</sup> JISC-Ciber (2008) 'Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future' (2008) <http://www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf> [Accessed 15 July 2014].

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=46> [Accessed 1 August 2014].

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.prisonvoices.org/?p=1033>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=46> [Accessed 1 August 2014].

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=46> [Accessed 1 August 2014].

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=46> [Accessed 1 August 2014].

within the undergraduate curriculum dedicated to ensure that students are fully trained in these areas.<sup>41</sup> Blogging and social media are used extensively by the arts and heritage organisations that offer employment opportunities for humanities graduates, so training is necessary, 'to the point that they are able both to feel confident with these alternative forms of assessment and demonstrate their digital literacy and creativity when entering the job market.'<sup>42</sup>

The importance of online archives means that the prioritisation of digital literacy needs to become a vital aspect of humanities teaching. Of course, lecturers do not necessarily have the time to build this in to their courses. Mussell encourages teachers and lecturers to, 'identify and draw upon what is already available on campus; however, the next stage is to work out how these skills might be developed through working with digitised newspapers and periodicals.'<sup>43</sup> On *Prison Voices*, Dr Rogers and I built this training into our sessions by getting them to post their blog posts online and disseminate them through Twitter and Facebook during class. 'Hands on' learning is an effective way of preparing students to be responsible and self-reflexive participants in the digital public sphere, and according to Helen Rogers, 'this is done most effectively by exposing them to a public audience.'<sup>44</sup> In addition we created a guide to using new social media which informed them of appropriate ways to behave online. Key to this, for example, was the consideration of the audience- we suggested that students should envisage the reader as one of their lecturers or as a future employer. Thankfully, helpful guides are now beginning to emerge online. [Blogging Beyond the Classroom](#) has started to run a series of 'how to' posts for tentative bloggers, and institutions such as the London School of Economics, in acknowledging the need to support scholars and students through the blogging process, have recently uploaded a set of comprehensive and useable [guidelines](#). As James Mussell concludes, teaching undergraduates to become confident, trained users and producers of digital content, 'not only helps students appreciate cultural artefacts in digital form, but can also equip them to function as active, independent and critical participants in digital culture.'<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Nadine Muller, 'Social Media Skills for students' (17 August, 2014) [blog] <http://www.nadinemuller.org.uk/social-media-skills/social-media-skills-for-students/> [Accessed 21 August 2014].

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.nadinemuller.org.uk/social-media-skills/social-media-skills-for-students/> [Accessed 21 August 2014].

<sup>43</sup> James Mussell, 'Teaching Nineteenth-Century Periodicals Using Digital Resources: Myths and Methods', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 45,(2) (Summer, 2012), 207.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?cat=8> [Accessed 1 August 2014].

<sup>45</sup> Mussell, *The Nineteenth-century Press*, 191.

The 2014 QAA benchmark statement recently placed digital literacy as a key transferrable skill for History undergraduates and that students should 'undertake a range of assignments reflecting the wide variety of ways in which historical arguments and narratives are articulated' including digital history projects.<sup>46</sup> We are yet to conduct analysis of the impact such a module like *Prison Voices* has on grades, but feedback from students has so far been overwhelmingly positive. In particular, learning how to write for new audiences outside the University has proved popular amongst the *Prison Voices* 2013 cohort and has boosted their employment profiles. Laura Shillcock, for example, noted that 'Blogging has become a new writing skill which I was able to take into my work experience placement at Influential PR.'<sup>47</sup> Publishing their posts online has increased students' confidence in their writing. Bethany Holligan wrote that,

Having my blog post commented on and gaining followers on Twitter through my ties to the *Prison Voices* website was incredibly rewarding. Without the use of social networking, I would not have had my blog post featured on other blogs.

[She continued,]

Most importantly, I feel like the trust Liverpool John Moores University has placed in the students to write academically for an audience as broad as the online community has increased the confidence in my own writing.<sup>48</sup>

Despite joining the module as 'digital apprentices', by the end of the course, students recognised the importance of social media in today's climate. 'Anon' noted that *Prison Voices* had prompted them to re-evaluate the role of social media and the importance of a professional digital footprint:

Before I started the module I generally used social media to have a moan or to post photos of nights out. However doing the module has made me realise how much attention you can draw to your work through social media and how much of an important aid it is in promoting your blog.<sup>49</sup>

Despite a negative reaction to one post on Twitter, the experience only made the student realise the 'reality of posting work online - that you have to be prepared for anything!'<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> QAA Subject Benchmark Statement. History. (June 2014), [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-consultation-history.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-consultation-history.pdf) [Accessed at 17 July 2014].

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=635>.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=109> [Accessed 16 September 2014].

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=109>, [Accessed 16 September 2014].

<sup>50</sup> <http://www.bloggingbeyondtheclassroom.org/?p=109>, [Accessed 16 September 2014].

#### 4 Value of Collaboration with Arts and Heritage

In a Higher Education environment which is increasingly affected by marketisation, pedagogy is integral to increasing employability for graduates - particularly for those in the arts and humanities. The Our Criminal Past series stressed the importance of forging relationships between Universities, schools and public history groups.<sup>51</sup> As Mike Neary and Andy Hagyard argue,

Students can be enabled to transcend the constraints of consumerism by overcoming the limits of what it is to be a student in higher education. They can do this through collaborative acts of intellectual enquiry, working with academics and with each other, on subjects that look beyond their own self-interest and identity as students.<sup>52</sup>

However, at present, collaboration between students, lecturers and arts and heritage bodies is scant. By putting students' work 'out there' online, they become part of a growing online community of researchers, curators, archivists and readers fascinated by the history of crime. Helen Rogers' two second-year undergraduate modules, [Writing Lives](#) and [Prison Voices](#), are leading examples of how students can collaborate with the wider community and forge links with arts and heritage institutions. In 2013, *Prison Voices* students visited the site of St George's Hall, formerly Liverpool's nineteenth century Assize court. As a result of their research blogs, which featured in the *Journal of Victorian Culture Online's* [Teaching and Learning Showcase](#), a partnership between LJMU and St George's Hall was created with the intention that students would produce resources for future educational exhibitions about nineteenth century crime and punishment. Also in 2013, *Prison Voices* sister project, [Writing Lives](#), was set up to encourage online collaboration beyond the module and showcase work from the soon to be digitised Burnett archive of working-class autobiographies.<sup>53</sup> The project will formalise collaboration with partnerships at LJMU and other HEIs such as Manchester Metropolitan University and hopes to act as a resource for teaching, research and popular and family history. So far the project has developed links with the Working Class Movements Library and the People's History Museum (Salford) where students will provide resources for and help design curatorial exhibitions and events. In the context of cuts in the arts

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<sup>51</sup> <http://www.ourcriminalpast.co.uk> [Accessed 15 August, 2014].

<sup>52</sup> Mike Neary and Andy Hagyard, 'Pedagogy of Excess: an alternative political economy of student life', *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer* (Routledge, 2010), 2.

<sup>53</sup> For information on the digitisation of John Burnett, David Mayall and David Vincent (eds.) *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography*, 3 vols. (Harvester, 1984, 1897, 1989) see <http://www.writinglives.org/uncategorized/archive-of-working-class-writing-online> [Accessed 1st August 2014].

and heritage sector, such work is vital. As James Mussell concludes, 'Encouraging students to produce digital work not only fosters digital literacy but can generate useful work for the wider community.'<sup>54</sup>

The use of new media technologies in the classroom is still in its infancy as is the role of students as collaborators. My experience of working on *Prison Voices* suggests that digital tools provide ways for students to become independent and self-reflexive users of digital content and competent associates in the safeguarding of public crime history. Roy Rosenzweig suggests that 'hands on', active approaches to pedagogy,

provide ways for students to make their work public in new media spaces as part of the learning process, ranging from the individual construction of Web pages to participation in large, ongoing collaborative resource projects that involve many students and faculty over many years of development.<sup>55</sup>

We are only just beginning to understand how digital tools can help students comprehend and express critical histories, but as Roy Rosenzweig says,

Student constructionist projects offer a potentially very rich synthesis of resources and expressive capabilities; they combine archival and database resources with conversational, collaborative, and dialogic tools, in digital contexts characterised by hypertext and other modes for discovering and representing relationships among knowledge objects.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

The availability of digital archives means that students are now able to experiment with the rich resources of crime history and, through social media, demonstrate how they can be used to create informative and interesting histories for audiences in and beyond universities. In making use of digital and social media in the classroom, the aim of *Prison Voices* has been to empower students to become active researchers and producers of crime history. In the 'digital classroom' students learn first-hand how to evaluate the mass of online material and produce creative and interrogative work that can cater for multiple audiences.

Blogging invites students to become a part of the vibrant online academic community. The blogosphere is to one extent an expansion of the classroom - a space in which students can evaluate each other's work, foster ideas and share resources - but it is also part of the 'academic public sphere' where academics, curators, writers, teachers and heritage professionals exchange ideas and resources,

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<sup>54</sup> Mussell, *The Nineteenth-century press*, 190.

<sup>55</sup> Rosenzweig, *Clio Wired*, 102-103.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*



and students' participation in this community should be encouraged. As Tim Hitchcock stated in a recent post, social media forms 'are doing the job of the seminar, and the letters page. They are where our conversation is happening.'<sup>57</sup> Participating in this growing online community and having access to the most current research dialogue is a huge benefit to undergraduates who rarely attend academic conferences.

The blogosphere also opens up ways of forging new relationships outside of the academy and with cultural organisations such as archives, museums and the media. Engaging students in knowledge production and exchange with these institutions allows us to find better ways of using and developing existing digital resources. Training students in digital literacy enhances their employability and encourages them to become confident participants in the digital public sphere. Funding is increasingly being directed towards collaboration between universities and public and commercial arts organisations, but there has been little emphasis on the ways in which students can contribute to this process. Students' involvement in collaborations with cultural organisations, through blogging, networking and exchanging resources, is a positive- both for students and teachers of crime history and for the wider community.

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<sup>57</sup> <http://historyonics.blogspot.co.uk/> [Accessed 20 July 2014].