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Regional

DeSpain uses latest technology to study English

In the public's imagination, English professors are often seen as individuals who, when not teaching, are obsessively reading and writing. Modern technologies, however, are challenging that notion. One clear example of this is Jessica DeSpain, an assistant professor in the department of English language and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Born in the rural community of Thomson, Ill., DeSpain received her bachelor's degree in liberal arts from Mount St. Clare College in Clinton, Iowa, and her doctorate in English from the University of Iowa. She credits her interest in pursuing a career as an English professor to the American poet Emily Dickinson.

"I started reading Emily Dickinson when I was in high school and pretty much anything that I needed to argue with my mom about I could find something in Emily Dickinson that would support my argument," said DeSpain. "So that is kind of how my love for Emily Dickinson started."

While in college she used Dickinson's writings to begin to think about reading in new and exciting ways. Today, DeSpain is fully immersed in a new way of thinking about writing – the emerging field of digital humanities, a controversial but exciting new field of knowledge.

"It is to use digital methods and applications to ask large-scale questions about the humanities that maybe you couldn't ask without that method or that system or that approach," she explained. "I was originally interested in rare books and learned as a student at Iowa that making books themselves was important for how I understood their historical operations. That really makes sense to me when I think about digital humanities, too. In

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order to interact with text you have to practice making text, whether they are digital or physical and I like to bring that into the classroom." Needless to say, her teaching of English using the latest computer technologies surprises many of her students.

"I have learned throughout time that English majors are not the most technology savvy students on campus," she said. "I teach a version of our senior assignment in the English department where students are required to create a digital project. And they work in groups and they conceptualize some issue and basically it is some exhibit of book history, some little aspect of book history." It is during these exercises, DeSpain said, that she realizes just how little experience her students have had with computers. She explains to them that the application of these technologies is becoming more and more widespread and many scholars have embraced them with a great deal of enthusiasm. "I learned how to describe the value of it for students and why this kind of technological skill matters, not just for reading but for critical thinking for their lives after they leave campus.

"One of the newest interventions is actually to involve students more directly, she said. "Because the digital humanities has been largely centered at top research institutions they have been asking a lot of really important questions but not imagining how this new work can enter into the classroom in really powerful ways. And so that is actually what I think SIUE has an opportunity to do with the IRIS (Interdisciplinary Research and Informatics Scholarship)

Center that might not happen at some of those large scale research centers, new ways of thinking about pedagogy and the digital humanities." The IRIS Center is an interdisciplinary facility at SIUE that helps support individual and collaborative scholarship by both faculty and students that uses digital content as a primary method of research.

The use of these new technologies is surprisingly not very expensive. "It is not out of the realm of a normal PC or Mac," said DeSpain. The concern, she added, is to have the appropriate technological support at the staff level that can answer computer questions by researchers in the humanities.

"That person can also help students ask and answer those questions and bring students and faculty together in really meaningful ways because they have both the technological and hopefully the humanist background," she said.

And the job market for students with these skills is quite vast. "If you think about the horrifying job market for your average English master's students or English Ph.D. students, this has become a viable second option where people who decide that they want to pursue this are working for libraries and they are working for digital humanities centers," DeSpain said.

"Also, I think that the skills that they obtain from this would be valuable to them in a lot of different environments, corporate environments for instance, knowing how to name files and knowing how to scan and archive files."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.



Bill Brinson/SIUE

Dr. Jessica DeSpain (right) and one of her students at the digital humanities lab at SIUE.