

ENGAGING UNDERGRADUATES IN THE DIGITAL HUMANITIES

The *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* allows colleges and universities to easily launch, enhance, or accelerate their digital scholarship programs, empowering researchers to successfully engage with the humanities in exciting new ways. Its intuitive cloud-based environment was specifically developed for searching, analyzing, organizing, and sharing primary source research material.

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Sarah Ketchley

ENHANCING DISCOVERABILITY

Sarah Ketchley, a lecturer and affiliate faculty member in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at the University of Washington, has used various digital resources to aid her research and teaching. “Due to the additional layer of scanning necessary to use physical archives in class, my research has primarily focused on digital archives versus physical collections,” explained Ketchley. “I’ve focused mostly on open source repositories that have proven to be great datasets for text mining.” Then, she started using the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* through the University of Washington. She and her students were able to leverage some of the university’s holdings from *Gale Primary Sources* in class to assist them with analysis. It was at this point that Ketchley discovered *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*, which she has since used extensively due to its broad subject range, as well as *The Times Digital Archive* for her own research.

“This past autumn session, I used the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* in class with a group of 35 students from different departments who had no experience of digital humanities. I chose historic menus as the class research theme—a topic broad enough to



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engage all the students in the class,” said Ketchley. “We used *Gale Primary Sources* to search historic menus, and it returned plenty of results. Then students narrowed the results down into usable content sets. The class was split into seven groups. Each created their own content sets in the *Lab* on the ‘menus’ theme. We ended up with seven distinct topics, including: ‘What did vegetarianism look like before WWI?’, ‘Chinese food in the United States,’ and ‘The evolution of the Thanksgiving menu since the 1800s.’ The advanced search function in the *Lab* helped students tease out the topics they were interested in as well as primary source content they wanted to explore further.”

“Searching for content can have an element of serendipity, so having this extra layer of discoverability and using the different filters really helped the students follow clues that popped up and increased their level of engagement on the subjects,” remarked Ketchley. For example, the group of students examining food habits during the Great Depression used the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* to run sentiment analysis of the content sets they developed. They saw a definite trend toward negative sentiment as the Depression kicked in, then saw where it leveled out a couple of years later as people adapted to living with limited resources. “The students gained profound insight from their analyses,” remarked Ketchley. Another group traced the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment, such as the prevalence of negative commentary on monosodium glutamate, based on Chinese menus they looked at in the *Lab*. “Students were able to trace the Americanization of Chinese food by building their content set and analyzing it. They saw the value of using digital tools for analysis in the classroom, which was far more accessible and achievable within the *Lab*. The content is integrated in the platform, enabling users to build a corpus with sufficient data very swiftly, then to conduct analyses and produce meaningful results,” Ketchley added.



Sarah Ketchley, Ph.D.,
Lecturer in the Department of Near
Eastern Languages and Civilization
University of Washington in Seattle, WA

INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY

When asked what tools and features are most valuable in a resource used for historical digitized archives, beyond full text searching, Ketchley answered, “Text cleaning is essential. If you’re working with optical character recognition (OCR) text that is full of misspellings, chances are the analysis results are not going to be particularly meaningful or useful. Having the ‘Clean Feature’ integrated in the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* was very useful, as we didn’t have to export the text content and clean it outside of the *Lab*. The students commented that this streamlined workflow was useful and intuitive. And, since the *Lab* is cloud based, it doesn’t have the

technical issues that commonly occur when students are expected to download external digital tools to their personal devices.” Ketchley explained, “With other resources, we had to devote at least an entire class session to troubleshooting downloads and installation. As a lecturer, the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* has made classroom management much easier. Plus, students gain insight into the workflow of digital humanists who conduct text analysis, which is a meaningful process for them to follow from beginning to end in a single platform.”

With regard to other challenges of digital humanities research, Ketchley considers building a corpus of data for analysis a significant pain point. “I’ve been building my own corpus of historical documents for eight years, outside the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab*, which has taken a lot of work to standardize and curate. In comparison, the *Lab* enables researchers to build within its four walls, so to speak. It’s very easy to add and remove material from a given content set. The *Lab* also offers tool configuration options, allowing a researcher to test their customizations, and keep iterating through the process of analysis until the results are satisfactory,” said Ketchley.



ENRICHING RESEARCH

Ketchley found that having everything available in one place gave researchers time to focus on their research questions rather than take time teaching themselves new technologies. “Having a cloud-based digital humanities platform where researchers can access all the *Gale Primary Sources* collections shifts the focus to where it should be—delving into the research questions and analyzing the results,” said Ketchley.

For many students with backgrounds in geography, engineering, and mathematical disciplines, this was their first time conducting in-depth historic research. “Access to archives like *Nineteenth Century Collections Online* and *The Times Digital Archive* made for a very profound research experience. It prompted them to think deeply about the nature of history and historical research,” said Ketchley. “In my experience, the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* noticeably improved student outcomes. The classroom experience was more engaging and in depth because students could focus on the digital humanities research process and outcomes rather than troubleshooting problems. Overall, this created a more enriching and meaningful experience.”

Ketchley continued, “One of the biggest barriers for students new to digital research is the vocabulary, as is the case with any new field. We were able to utilize the glossary of terms and the help documentation available in the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* as a starting point, which really helped make the discipline accessible to the novice. We also benefited from the knowledge and expertise of the Gale digital content specialists who spoke to students about the process of creating a digital archive. They also explained OCR text and why perfect accuracy can be challenging. This background information helped the students engage more fully with the OCR text, as they understood OCR confidence levels and the factors that can influence it.”

FUTURE BENEFITS

From a faculty perspective, Ketchley is sensitive to the fact that many humanities students are concerned about job prospects after university. “They’re aware they must demonstrate to future employers that they’re technologically proficient; it’s not even an option to not be,” explained Ketchley. “They often struggle to gain these skills in traditional humanities classes, but access to the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* can help students gain the skills employers require, and speak knowledgeably in their job interviews. Moreover, faculty can use the platform for research and teaching without having to learn how to code. The *Lab* removes a significant technological barrier to entry, both for faculty and students.”

Ketchley noted that sustainability is another advantage to having a cloud-based digital humanities platform. “A few of my student interns have built digital tools, but would then graduate and move on, and we wouldn’t know what was going on in terms of development. It became very difficult to maintain what we had built. A lot of open source tools die because the faculty who built them move on to other things; there’s no sustainability. With the *Gale Digital Scholar Lab*, there is a cohort of dedicated developers who are constantly keeping the platform updated and functional. Plus, the Gale team is interested in feedback from users. With the regular *Lab* update releases, they can incorporate feedback, tweaks, and requests into the development roadmap, which is quite unique with a commercial vendor,” said Ketchley.

With regard to how these resources might advance scholarship in the field of digital humanities, Ketchley believes they can advance student engagement with positive outcomes. “The *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* has brought humanities and computer-based students together in a collaborative



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and interdisciplinary setting which has really prompted engagement and increased student involvement. From my own research perspective, I am using the *Lab* to build newspaper content sets related to the early history of Egyptology, and analyzing those sets using topic modeling to discern themes that I wouldn't be able to find otherwise within big data sets," Ketchley concluded.

FEATURED RESOURCE

The *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* is designed to transform the way scholars and students access and analyze Gale primary source content by offering solutions to some of the most common challenges facing researchers in the digital humanities today. By integrating an unmatched depth and breadth of digital primary source content with popular digital humanities tools for text mining, the *Lab* provides a new lens to explore history and empowers researchers to generate significant conclusions and outcomes.

ABOUT SARAH KETCHLEY

Sarah Ketchley serves as an in-house scholar and advisor to Gale and its library partners. She is an Egyptologist with a doctorate in first millennium BCE Egyptian art history from the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom. Ketchley was a visiting scholar at the University of Washington, then became a lecturer and affiliate faculty member in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization. Her teaching focus is primarily in the digital humanities. Ketchley's interest in 19th-century Nile travel piqued after she found an unpublished travel journal written by Emma B. Andrews, the mistress of an early excavator in Egypt's Valley of the Kings, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her research focuses on this diary, along with other unpublished archival material from hidden women in archaeology. She uses digital tools to analyze and visualize primary source content, exploring social networks, archaeology, and early tourism in Egypt at the turn of the century.

Ketchley established an undergraduate internship program in the digital humanities in 2011. This led to funding to build and teach an introduction to digital humanities course for undergraduate and graduate students, which she has taught regularly since 2015.

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