All the world’s a stage,
and all the men and
women merely players.

De-moc-ra-cy: A government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly. *(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)*

Dig-i-tal hu-man-i-ties: A democratic approach to making humanities research accessible to the public so they can investigate culture themselves. *(See above)*

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.
DIGITAL HUMANITIES

CONNECTING THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

By KATHLEEN TUCK

Once upon a time, scholars hunched over dusty tomes, carefully scanning each page in search of nuggets of truth or enlightenment to further their research. Today, they often can access that information just by tapping the screen of their iPad mini.

What’s even more exciting is that information once reserved solely for those with the proper credentials is now readily available to anyone—deliberately so. Information, museum exhibitions and debates centering on current events are just a click away.

“I think it’s important to interact with the public,” said Dr. Leslie Madsen-Brooks, an assistant professor of history who also is the university’s inaugural digital arts and humanities fellow for 2013-2014. “So much writing is done in a really opaque language for a very small audience. By contrast, the Web has a nearly infinite audience, and we need to share our work there in a way that is engaging and accessible.”

As a fellow, Madsen-Brooks gets an office in the Ron and Linda Yanke Family Research Park, relief from teaching and service responsibilities and project funding.

Dr. Nick Miller, director of Boise State’s Arts and Humanities Institute and a history professor, noted that digital technologies are changing the way we “make history” in various ways. “Most importantly, I think, they make the way we conceive and present history more democratic, more public and more participatory,” he said.

Madsen-Brooks is committed to finding ways for the public to interact with online materials. To that end, she created the Boise Wiki, an online community site where ordinary people can record Boise’s history as they see it. Anyone registering for an account at localwiki.net/boise can contribute information about arts, culture,
“The Boise Wiki gives people a chance to participate in history, even if it is messy,” she said. “They can share their own experiences in their own words.”

Madsen-Brooks is quick to point out that while not all of the posted information may be accurate, due to its self-post nature, it does offer a place for people to tell their stories and share their experiences.

“While it’s possible to find factual information about Idaho history on Wikipedia or educational websites, there are fewer places to find out what Boiseans believe to be true about their city,” she said.

Madsen-Brooks came to Boise State in 2010 with a broad background, including experience in museums, technology and cultural studies. That combination naturally led to an interest in making some of the artifacts in the Idaho State Historical Society’s collection available to a broader audience. This spring semester she is focusing on a project at the society’s Boise museum.

Working with Historical Society curatorial registrar Sarah Phillips, Madsen-Brooks is browsing through hundreds of medical artifacts to determine which objects in the collection might best illustrate how Idahoans have viewed health and wellness over the past 150 years. Because Idaho is experiencing a doctor shortage due to its geographical isolation, she feels the project will be especially relevant.

Madsen-Brooks is tasked with sorting through the artifacts and helping provide missing information regarding changes in medicine and medicinal uses of the pieces throughout Idaho’s history. Artifacts include a jug for irradiated water (thought to provide vigor and a healthy glow), nerve tonics, mortician’s cosmetics, dentures and surgical...
instruments of all shapes and sizes.

“By having her delve into the collection, we can see what we need to photograph, document or catalog,” Phillips said. “It’s a mutually beneficial project. We are able to talk about the transition of health care and we get a scholar to work with the collection and show us what we have.”

Like most museums, only about 10 percent of the historical society’s collection is on display at any given time. This project will allow previously unviewed items to be shared with the public – and that helps raise awareness and insight.

“The past is nebulous,” Phillips said. “Objects make it more concrete.”

And the benefits aren’t limited to just those objects in storage. Items on display are often set behind a barrier or pane of glass, making it hard to get a good look. But pair that in-person encounter with information and a close-up view on a tablet, and the experience can become much more meaningful.

“One of the key innovations of Leslie’s work is that it not only welcomes but prioritizes public contributions via multiple platforms – the Web and mobile devices,” Miller said. “Her project takes what would be a wonderful museum display and makes it a much more dynamic agent for understanding the past.”

Madsen-Brooks is a firm believer in the power of the Internet to connect learners with information. Working with fellow historian Dr. Lisa Brady, she crafted a project to bring digital humanities to students in the Master of Applied Historical Research program. All current students in that program are required to use an iPad, and lessons and assignments incorporate digital resources into the process.

“The iPads are not great for creating projects, but they are good for consuming information, sharing that information, and participating in conversations around it,” Madsen-Brooks said. “Today’s students need to enter the workforce already tech savvy about using technology in these ways.”

There already are millions of primary and secondary sources available online – ranging from texts, artifacts and maps to video and audio files – and more are being added every day. The challenge then becomes how to make them more readily accessible and relevant, and how to engage the end user.

The field of digital humanities has been hot for the past five to ten years, Madsen-Brooks said, and it doesn’t look like that will change soon. “Thirty years ago, it was all about digital computing. Where will it end up? That depends on the university and what investment it can make for faculty and student needs.”

DIGITAL COLLECTIONS AT BOISE STATE

Boise State’s Special Collections and Archives strives to make its collections available both in person and online.

What to make available via the Web is determined primarily by what archivists know researchers will use, but selections also aim to highlight lesser-known collections. Once a collection is selected, a sample of materials is scanned as images or PDF documents, and metadata is added to enable searching.

Making portions of collections available online allows for access to a wider audience and enables people from around the world to learn about the resources available at Boise State. Recently added digital collections include: Pete Cenarrusa Collection, Boise Development Collection and Claudio Beagarie photographs of California farm workers. Other digital collections include more than 2,500 photos of historic Boise State, Frank and Bethine Church, Nell Shipman, Robert W. Limbert, the Western Writers Series and several university documents.

To access Albertsons Library Special Collections, visit library.boisestate.edu/special.