# Letter from Ben

Hello and welcome to DSAM 3000, the informatively named Seminar in Digital Studies and Methods! (I hope that, midway through the first lesson, you’ll see that I’m only half-joking.) I like to start the semester with a letter for a few reasons: one, because it feels more personal than a syllabus, which tends to be more about policy than personality; two, because I feel like part of my job is always to help you as writers and presenters, so it’s only fair to present some of my own writing; and three, because the act of writing the letter actually helps me think about the semester more synthetically than planning individual lessons or reading assignments, and once I’ve got that synthetic sense of how it all hangs together, I see no reason not to share it with you.

The way I see it, this seminar is here to help you open methodological doors: to help you see new digital places where you can apply the humanistic toolsets you’re already building, and new digital toolsets you can apply to your humanistic questions. But even more than both of those, I want to give you the confidence to keep trying new things, even when they’re hard, and enough experience to know where to look for new things to try. I can’t find all those things for you; there just isn’t enough time, and in any case, you’d then be limited to the kinds of questions and tools that are important to *me*.

To be fair, we *will* have shared assignments – both readings for home and activities for class-time – which *will* be chosen from what I’ve come across so far. (That’s just kinda how teaching works: I can’t point out what I haven’t yet seen, and what I’ve found helpful to me will likely come up when I try to be helpful to you.) But even then, I see these shared references as a kind of crossroads inn to bring us back together after our various solo trips, and to give us some language in common to discuss where we’ve been and what we’ve seen.

Maybe this is the moment to say what kinds of things I do know best. My own path to this room is through Writing Studies, or Rhetoric and Composition, and my research has mostly involved visualizing metadata (data *about* data), especially metadata about written sources: things like where they were written, and when, about what, cited by whom, in what format. For the kind of analysis I’ve done most, word order isn’t as important as how many times words come up, in what clusters. I end up saying “in the aggregate” a lot. I work with code, though I’m not a brilliant programmer, and that combination gives me a deep appreciation for the scale of what brilliant programmers have been able to achieve – and an even deeper appreciation for the many tutorials and walkthroughs and entire open codesets they have seeded generously across the internet. There’s just a ton out there to discover! So I see my role in DSAM 3000 less as an expert tour guide and more as a fellow traveler who’s been on the road a while. I can tell you my enthusiasms (and I probably will, if you get me started), but I’ll be equally excited if you find something I’ve never seen before, and excited also to explore it with you.

The semester is scaffolded around a series of pairs, or intersections, as you probably saw on your way to the Week 1 page. Today started with the big picture, at the crossroads of (digital + studies); next time, we’ll talk about various approaches to digital projects, and some processes we’ll hold in common: (inquiry + iteration). With (code + comments) I want to make sure you all have at least a basic introduction to scripting languages, and the moves they all share. After that we’ll have a three-week unit on representing an analog world in digital spaces, considering the choices people make when they digitize and datify – and then chart or map that digital world back to other people – and the ways that these transformations are always incomplete. [(data + people), (materiality + modeling), (space + time)] That brings us to a week on widening audiences [(access + accountability)], and finally a look behind the scenes of “AI” [(machines + learning)], because it’s important to pull back the curtain.

After that, the selections come from you! (exploration + inspiration) is a chance for you to investigate digital projects in your home discipline – to see what questions or tools have been valued there, and maybe find some allies to connect with in conferences or committees. And in that one week between Thanksgiving break and the last class, I’ve set aside time for the “people’s choice”: I’ve got readings planned for at least eight possible conversations, and if there’s a topic you’d rather dig into that’s not on that list, give me a week-or-two head start and I can pull together something on that instead. Or you may decide that what you really want is extra time in class to work on your projects. That’s good, too. We’ll vote in week 13.

I just said “your projects.” What projects, you ask? Well, throughout the semester you’ll build a public-facing record of your inquiry into a subject of your own choosing with the understanding that *digitality* must be key to either your methods or your object of study. These can vary as much as your interests do, and in the next week or two I’d like to meet with each of you one-on-one to discuss some possibilities. The homework assignment after this class will hopefully shed light on what I mean, but in brief: you’ll iteratively build some kind of website or open-access archive, working from questions to sources that you process to yield some kind of claim or intervention you can present to an audience beyond our class. (If there are important reasons *not* to make the site public, we can talk about it; you may end up sharing just with us. But you do need to trust at least your classmates, and you need to be worthy of that trust in return.)

This being an introductory seminar, I’m not expecting everyone to complete a peer-review-publishable argument or exhibit in just fourteen weeks! I am, though, expecting everyone to make progress toward defensible claims and presentable artifacts. By the end of the course, you should be ready to propose a semester-long project you *could* take to completion in DSAM 3100: Practicum, which runs in the spring. Out of curiosity, how many people here are thinking of doing the full DSAM certificate? It’s okay if you’re not sure! But in case you *do* want to continue, to make the transition smoother, we’re going to have one of the Practicum instructors joining us periodically throughout the semester – starting in week 3, because we’ll be reading one of her articles. It’s Dr. Alison Langmead, whom I believe some of you already know? She’s the person to talk to about – well, many things, but specifically relevant now, she’s the person to talk to about getting that DSAM certificate.

And to be clear, it’s also okay if you get to the end of this class and say, “that was enough digital studies and/or methods for me.” No hard feelings. Digital work can be frustrating. I feel it’s important to say this up front! Sometimes people think computers make things faster, but that’s as misleading as the idea that “practice makes perfect.” In both cases, repetition can make things automatic, but defining what repeats and refining how they happen takes a whole lot of time, effort, and mindfulness. Mindful work with digital humanities can, in fact, take much *longer* than work in modes you’re already used to.

To make the most of our time together, you should plan to spend at least 2–6 hours on your project every week, on top of the shared reading. (I’ve tried to keep the reading assignments light for that reason – they peak at about 100 pages, and average closer to 75. There are also some weeks with no assigned reading, just project time.) But “hours working on your project” won’t always look like writing, or lead to public-facing material. Sometimes you’ll be searching for answers to questions about your objects of study. Sometimes you’ll be sitting with those objects, trying to refine what questions you want to ask. A lot of times, I expect, you’ll be reading documentation to figure out how to use a tool to answer your question. Maybe sometimes you’ll be writing and debugging code or adding labels to a spreadsheet. Sometimes you’ll take notes just for yourself, in shorthand, which sometimes, later, you’ll rewrite for a wider audience. But all of that is part of learning, even though it may not always feel like it.

So you need to build some resilience, and some momentum. You need to see the incremental progress you’re making, even if it feels sometimes like you’re moving backwards or sideways or not moving at all. And you need to know that you’re not alone in feeling that way.

I’ve built in a few ways of facilitating this.

First, I’m going to ask you to account for your working time: a daily “Mindful Practice Journal” of what hours you worked on your project and what you did in those hours. This, too, can take whatever shape you prefer. A spreadsheet? A text document? A folder with screenshots? All of the above? That’s your call. Record it in whatever way you see fit, but it must be recorded somehow: write down what hours you worked on your project, and what you did in that time.

Importantly, your mindful practice journal is private. I will not ask you to share the journal itself with anyone, even me. But I will ask you to look back at it and talk to the class *about* it: to interpret and present *what you have learned from the journaling*. Do you have patterns? Stuckpoints? Breakthroughs? What does your journal show you about how this kind of work… works? But most importantly, looking back at these notes, you’ll show yourself that you weren’t wasting time: you were reading documentation, or you were cleaning messy data, or so on and so forth. And maybe even writing! Who knows. But you were *moving*.

Second, in weeks when we have shared readings, I’ll also ask you to write and share a more public *reader response*: in other words, what caught your attention? What did it make you think of, or wonder? To keep these from being floaty abstractions (or pure busy-work that you hand off to ChatGPT), I’m asking that everyone (a) include a short quotation from one of our shared texts, *and* (b) either pose a question to the class *or* begin a response to a question a classmate posed. So keep track of those as you’re reading. You may want to use a digital annotation tool like [hypothes.is](https://hypothes.is/) or a bibliographic manager like [Zotero](https://zotero.org/) (which quite frankly changed my life when I discovered it in grad school!).

These posts will be the starting points for our in-class conversation the following Monday morning, so **please don’t wait until midnight on Sunday to post them.** **By Friday would be ideal.** I’ll show you where to post them by the end of today’s class.

These posts will also, by the end of the term, become a record of where your mind has gone, so your insight or line of inquiry won’t get pushed out or buried under the next thought and the next and the next.

Third, I’m going to ask you to publicly present your project, *before* it’s finished, and multiple times. Four times, to be exact – once each month. To help you deepen your project and see the progress you’re making, I’ve named each of these iterations using a template from Miriam Posner, who says that most digital projects amount to *sources, processed and presented*: First, establish what you’re working with (iteration 1: sources); then figure out how to make it tractable by computers (iteration 2: processed). Ideally, that gives you space to form some hypotheses: a sense of what processing these sources helps you to see or say (iteration 3: and…?). The final day of class will be about showcasing all you’ve achieved (iteration 4: presented).

These presentations can be informal – they’re about work in progress, after all – and will draw not only on whatever you think you’ve “accomplished,” but also on the processes you’ve written down in your Mindful Practice Journals. What habits or patterns you each notice, individually, will thus be put side by side with what your classmates noticed, and working together we’re more likely to figure some things out. As we move forward, I’ll have more specific guidance for how to prepare for each presentation.

Finally, I’m going to introduce all of you to GitHub, one of the places where a lot of digital humanities projects are shared (along with a great many more projects beyond DH). It’s a place where you can post files, and write about them, even if you don’t want to make a website. (Though if you do want to make a website, GitHub lets you do that, too. It’s what I’ve used for our class site.) But best of all, as we’ll discuss after next week’s break, GitHub prominently displays and celebrates the work-in-progress-ness of *all* its projects, because it makes the dynamic history of every file visible.

Because digital projects *are* variable and changing, even as they remain themselves. Kind of like people, if you think about it.

I look forward to marking the changes with you!

(please call me) Ben