

# Panopticon and the people

Digital approaches to the history of crime and punishment at University of Liverpool

## Summary

The undergraduate module 'panopticon and the people' was developed by Dr Zoe Alker, Lecturer in the department of sociology, social policy and criminology at the University of Liverpool. It uses a range of digital archive collections, both freely available and subscription services, to engage students directly with primary sources. This module ran for the first time in 2017/18.

Benefits to participants include:

- Following individual life histories of criminals by linking records across collections
- Using keyword searches and frequency analysis to understand the influence of the media
- Understanding the advantages and limitations of different digital archive collections
- Appreciating how digital archives are created, and what this means for historical scholarship in the internet age
- Offering choice and flexibility to support differentiated learning styles
- Enabling students to be "digital apprentices"; everyone learns together and there are no pre-requisites

## How the module works

Students use a range of freely-available resources including **Old Bailey online** (<https://oldbaileyonline.org>) and **Digital Panopticon** (<https://digitalpanopticon.org>), as well as a number of subscription services such as

British Library 19th century newspapers online. The choice of resources arises from Zoe's own earlier work, and in particular her post-doctoral research contribution to Digital Panopticon (AHRC) and After care: youth justice and its impacts, 1850-1920 (Leverhulme).

Students locate an individual offender using Digital Panopticon, then they investigate linked records in other sources to build upon a "cradle-to-grave" life story, filling in further details about the person's life, family, location, circumstances etc. They like this element of researching individual lives:

***"[It was] good that we were able to find our own criminal to talk about"***

***"[It] allows you to engage with the lives of criminals which has not been possible before"***

They use keyword searches and frequency analysis to study newspaper reports and reflect on the influence of the media in forming public opinion. By downloading an app and using a virtual reality headset, students can explore a 3D model of Bentham's Panopticon (Alker and Webb, 2016 - not yet published). This prison was designed but never actually built.

### **Pedagogical aims**

Students engage directly with primary materials, more easily, in more depth and on a much greater scale than would have been possible without digitisation.

Through being exposed to multiple collections, students come to appreciate the advantages and limitations of different resources, as well as the opportunities afforded by record linking across collections.

They also gain a real appreciation of how the digital collections are developed and curated, coming to understand the decision-making and "hidden labour" that goes into creating such resources, and the collaborative research effort required. This approach adds an extra layer to critical pedagogy and historical scholarship in the internet age. It provides students with another layer to critique, in that online datasets are curated sets of knowledge, and not "total" in their coverage of resources / histories.

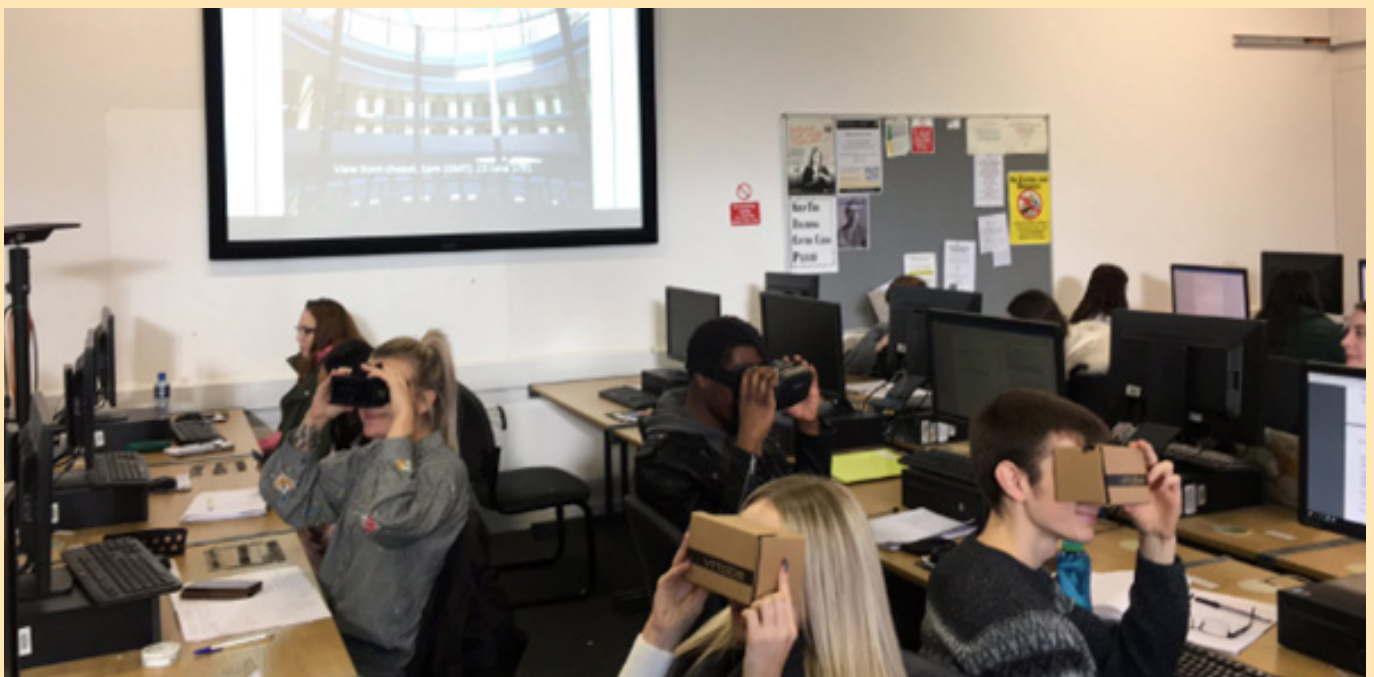
The module engages and empowers students through this direct experience of working

with primary materials, and they become collaborators in the research process, thus redressing the balance of power between teacher and students. As Zoe says,

***"This process de-centres the classroom dynamic and invites students to get hands on with primary research in the virtual archive"***

### **Access, discovery and learning environment**

Students are directed to the online collections, and any password access is managed through the library (they have a "really fantastic librarian"). In addition to the resources listed, students can use a bespoke dataset of 500 offenders which Zoe created herself. Zoe pre-selects the materials within which students conduct their research (rather than giving them a totally free hand), in order to ensure they meet the pedagogic aims of the module.



Students work on the digital archive collections in campus-based labs. Much of the material is available off-campus, but Zoe has found that it is easier to support students face to face, and this avoids having to provide different instructions for a range of operating systems. This does though have implications for space allocation on campus and the type of learning environment required. The class size (60 students) presents challenges; Zoe supports students initially through the screen and then by walking around engaging directly with individuals. Timed tasks are helpful, and she allows plenty of time for discussion in each session.

### Skills

There are no pre-requisites for this module; the emphasis is on students as "digital apprentices" where everyone is learning together. The approach is inclusive, offering students choice and flexibility, and drawing on text, images, sound and 3D modelling to support differentiated learning styles.

Throughout the course students develop the ability to think critically about both sources and collections. They consider the context in which the original materials were created, and the opportunities and constraints affecting the development of the digital collection. This allows them to reflect on what is being exposed as well as what might remain hidden through these processes. They are introduced to the skills of the digital historian, including online research, big data analytics, and the ability to manage their own digital profile so as to carry on an online academic conversation even after leaving university (through blogs, Twitter etc).

There is no formal employer engagement in the curriculum, but students gain valuable skills for later employment, including online writing and the ability to find and evaluate online information.

***["We] learn incredible new skills which are useful for [a] CV such as digital record linkage and blog posts".***

Other skills (such as data visualisation and corpus linguistics) could potentially lead on to postgraduate work, and students also note the value of "learning new skills for research".

Zoe points to influential web resources such as **the Programming Historian (<https://programminghistorian.org>)** and **Codecademy ([codecademy.com](https://codecademy.com))**. Here experts share their skills through lessons that are freely available, and Zoe notes the importance for both staff and students of sharing experiences and skills online in order to disseminate knowledge. She has benefitted from the experience of others working in the field, and in turn provides advice and guidance to colleagues at Liverpool and elsewhere.

### Lessons learned and wider impact

Current students are used to living and working in an online environment, but the particular digital history skills required for this module are new to them. One student sought to reconcile things by suggesting that what they were using was "*Google for dead people*". Zoe notes that coding and programming skills are now being taught in schools, such that future students will be starting from a different place. She would love to have scope in her course to teach coding.

Zoe emphasises the "digital apprentice" approach, which requires establishing students' knowledge and abilities at the start and working with them from that starting point, rather than making assumptions.

Student feedback on the new module has been overwhelmingly positive, and they are achieving results comparable with other modules. Zoe plans to increase the weighting for the research element of the module from 30% to 50% next year as this has proved so valuable.

In the future students might also work collaboratively, rather than individually, on projects including the creation of datasets. The freely available digital archival collections are particularly useful as there are no paywall barriers, and Zoe would love to see all collections made available in this way. It would also be valuable to offer downloadable datasets for students and researchers to use independently, so as to extend the use of quantitative research techniques such as mapping and graphing. Digital panopticon will be providing datasets through the Figshare repository from 2018/19.

#### Find out more

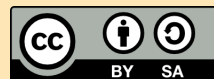
Contact: Dr Zoe Alker

Email: [z.alker@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:z.alker@liverpool.ac.uk)

Alker, Z. (2016) Building Bentham's Panopticon. The Digital Panopticon Blog

<https://blog.digitalpanopticon.org/?p=1188>

Accessed 4th July 2018



Education consultancy Sero HE was commissioned by Jisc to interview Dr Zoe Alker about developments **in learning and teaching in a digital age** at the University of Liverpool. The studies focus in particular on the impact of such developments on the student experience.