

A DIGITAL MAPPING APPROACH TO LITERARY ANALYSIS: PROMOTING METACOGNITION AMONG GEN-Z STUDENTS

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Abstract

Teaching carries special challenges for the instructor whose audience is composed of the demographic group known as Gen Z. The cohort born between 1997 and 2012 has been characterized as being accustomed to experiencing the world through digital platforms and expecting immediate results (Indelicato 2024). They are also reading less and are described as having shorter attention spans (Rothman 2016; Sliwa 2018). Such tendencies may be especially problematic in the teaching of literary analysis. To deal with these challenges, instructional technology tools may be particularly useful. Certain pedagogical tools have been developed allowing for the creation of shareable interactive maps that complement reading and enhance visualization and immersive experiences. One such application is ArcGIS StoryMaps® which, according to its creators, “informs, inspires and engages stakeholders.” This presentation describes the application of ArcGIS StoryMaps® in the course “French Literature before the Revolution: Coming of Age from the Middle Ages through the Revolution.” The application was employed to assist the discussion of Voltaire’s philosophical tale *Candide, ou de l’Optimisme*. Thanks to its narrative arc and the journey undertaken by its protagonists, *Candide*, lends itself to visual, digital, and cartographic analysis. We hypothesized that a careful reading of the tale, accompanied by collaborative mapping work, might captivate Gen Z students and encourage them to engage in critical thinking about the classroom material. The combination of reading and creation allows students, on the one hand, to better grasp the content of the work and, on the other, encourages them to engage in thoughtful and metacognitive work, as well as self-knowledge through their own personal journey that would follow in the footsteps of the protagonists of the tale. During the module dedicated to *Candide*, the six students enrolled in the course worked in pairs to create digital maps on the ArcGIS StoryMaps® platform. Each map was associated with a different geographical location in the story and appears in chronological order. The result, available online, is an interactive edition of the students’ research and reflections. The presentation focuses on the methodology used. In the session, we will view some of the pages developed by the students and examine the advantages and disadvantages of the project. We will also make recommendations for future projects and open the discussion to invite attendees to share their opinions and their own experiences with this (or other similar) platforms.

Keywords: *Digital humanities, digital mapping, French literature.*

1. Introduction

Teaching and student engagement are constantly evolving and adapting to new research, best practices, availability of new tools, and the contemporary culture. Gen Z students, born between the years 1997 and 2012, like generations prior, were shaped by their upbringing and the conditions surrounding their development. They have been described as reading less than previous generations and being consumed by their electronic devices (Rothman 2016; Sliwa 2018). As such, they have grown up in a culture of immediacy and instant gratification, where they may become frustrated if results are not instantaneous (*Understanding Gen Z*). The Chronicle of Higher Education recently published a volume, *Understanding the Gen Z Student: The Changing Classroom and Campus* (2025), dedicated to increasing awareness of the shifting culture of Gen Z students and understanding how best to engage with them.

When teaching literary analysis of texts from past eras, it can be hard to retain students' attention and encourage their engagement—especially with a generation so reluctant to read and appreciate delayed gratification. How can we, as educators, combat the perceived indifference and disengagement on the part of our Gen Z students? One way of fostering greater student engagement may be by adapting to students' interests and adopting online resources into the curriculum. Such tools can act to supplement the reading and analysis of texts.

The field of digital humanities offers a plethora of opportunities for such pivoting and adaptation. Certain pedagogical tools have been developed allowing for the creation of shareable interactive maps that complement reading and enhance visualization and immersive experiences. One specific example of this type of tool is ArcGIS StoryMaps®. According to its creators, ArcGIS StoryMaps® “informs, inspires and engages stakeholders.” It functions using Geographic Information Systems technology (GIS). The basic version of the application is free. The end product is long-lasting, of free access to anyone with the link, and allows for exercising student creativity and agency, while contributing to posterity, in an authentic context, with real-world application. Its use may, therefore, be beneficial in boosting student engagement while studying literary texts.

In *Making Writing Meaningful*, Eodice *et al* (2025) advance that student engagement with the active skill of writing requires four key components: personal connections to student communities; authenticity and relevance to the real world; opportunities to learn course content in the context of their passions; and opportunities to do research and learn from it. We posit that these elements are equally valid and valuable in literary analysis. In this paper, we explore how the study of Voltaire's 18th century philosophical tale *Candide ou de l'Optimisme* was supplemented and enriched by the parallel assignment of creating a collaborative online digital storytelling map using ArcGIS StoryMaps®, available to others to support in their own respective reading and analysis of the work. Use of this readily available online tool creates a relevant and authentic way to analyze the text, with a result for posterity. It provides students with accountability and agency, in their group decision-making, allowing them to learn course content through their own research and connect that learning to a medium they are familiar with. After completion of the assignment, students expressed greater engagement with, and understanding of, the literary work, while exercising important high impact practices (HIPs), such as collaborative work and project, as well as learning communities (American Associate of Colleges and Universities).

2. Motivation and methods

Due to a growing realization in recent years that fewer students were interested in courses focused on literature and were becoming more resistant to literature and reading in general, it became necessary to adapt and propose new modes of presenting and working with literary works in order to motivate students. It became necessary to “translate” literature to an audience that was unaccustomed to interacting with it.

As a part of the curriculum (fall 2024, in FREN330: French Literature Before the Revolution), students read Voltaire's philosophical tale, *Candide, ou de l'Optimisme*. In addition to in-class discussion and historical contextualization of the work, students were assigned a collaborative project to create an interactive map utilizing ArcGIS Storymaps® software to follow the journey undertaken by the story's protagonists. Staff from the Library and Instructional Technology introduced students to ArcGIS Storymaps® and guided them in the steps necessary to publish the content they compiled independently.

The goals of the project were to create an overarching narrative arc that explored the various locations in the novel, to examine their symbolism and the implications of the events for the plot's development and dénouement, and to refer to implied criticism and commentary. Students were given the choice of eight locations and created a total of 10 subpages in the interactive map (“Paraguay et Buenos Aires” were separated into two pages, and “Turquie” was separated into “La maison du Prince de Transylvanie” and “Constantinople”). The project was designed to be a collaborative effort, with reflection and independent research, in a context of structured freedom, where the instructor acted as guide, and students exercised accountability, autonomy and agency in their choices of images, written text, and sources researched.

For each location page, students indicated the corresponding chapter(s) in the story, provided a summary of key events and their significance within the overall narrative, and specified critiques, underlying messages, lessons learned, or associated symbolism that they discerned. Additionally, for each location page, students needed to include an image (with appropriate permissions and citation), direct quotes from the text, and at least one secondary source researched which supported their analysis and was integrated into the written text (using proper MLA citations).

Students created a single shared document, so that all had access to the drafts for the different locations, a group introduction and a group conclusion, along with a references page. The writing process involved a first draft that was both peer reviewed and reviewed by the instructor. A second draft then was imported into ArcGIS. Once the images and text were chosen, students published the content to be visible to all those with access to the link. As a final step, students conducted a bilingual presentation of the content of their respective subpages to their classmates and Instructional Technology staff. They also completed an anonymous survey about their experience with the project. Students gave permission to share and publish their feedback on this ArcGIS project.

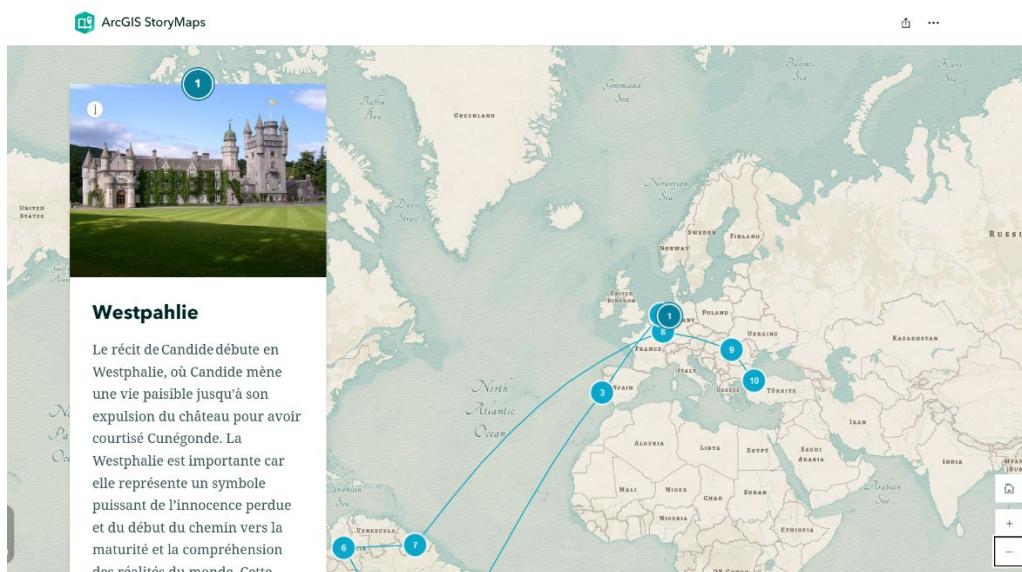
3. Results and discussion

As a result of the project, students published an online interactive map showcasing the journey of the protagonists of Voltaire's novella. The map, resulting from collaborative work among students, who exercised their agency and creativity in making decisions regarding images and written text for each of the locations on the map, allows the reader to click on each of the locations, zoom in, and read a synopsis with brief analysis of the action occurring in that locale. The reader can follow the journey chronologically or may choose to review the locations out of order. The online map is available, for free, to anyone with the link to the website (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/18b308d80b16422bb8a79c496d5cb551>). Figures 1 and 2 show snapshots of the title page (Figure 1) and one of the subpages for the chapter on Westphalie (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Title page of ArcGIS Storymaps® project, available online.



Figure 2. Westphalie subpage of ArcGIS Storymaps® project, available online.



Students knew that this project would be outward-facing and available to the public, and that, therefore, it would have relevance to the real world outside of the classroom. It became important to them that content be precise and concise. In conceiving their written text collaboratively, they had to place themselves in the shoes of their readers: "...to organize our learning that way [...] pushed me to pay closer attention to detail and stay focused on the themes of *Candide*" (Student 1). There was an added level of responsibility and accountability, which may not have been as present to them in an in-class close-reading or essay that would only be read by the professor. The project became consequential in their view, as it was situated in an authentic context, allowing tangible connections to their experiences (Eodice *et al*, 2025), visualization and contextualization of the material read: "[It allowed] me to pinpoint exactly the movement and travels of *Candide*" (Student 2); "the [student] presentations made more sense than the book for me because I could visualize the map better and hearing the perspectives of others in different locations [...] made sense to me" (Student 3).

Since students were accountable, the project also pushed them to focus more on details they may have otherwise overlooked: "Had we not done this project, I probably wouldn't have sat down and really looked at how Voltaire used his writing in ways that had undertones of different themes and critiques" (Student 4). Finally, interacting with the text in this manner led students to learn for themselves, while researching and following their own path in the process:

"Before doing the ArcGIS project, I did not pay attention to every location or give each chapter much thought. There were chapters where it appeared the events did little other than develop the plot. For example, in Paraguay, I previously thought the only thing the location brought was a pressure for *Candide* to continue fleeing. However, after researching the symbolism, I found that the event in Paraguay actually contributed to the moral development of *Candide*. In general, I felt that this project allowed me to consider the purpose of each location more and understand why Voltaire included the chapter" (Student 5).

Student feedback resonates with Eodice *et al*'s precepts for creating meaningful learning for students: The project offered an opportunity to engage with material, with connections, authenticity, attention to content and details and individual learning through research.

3.1. Challenges and recommendations

One recommendation the author has for any future work in a similar assignment is based on feedback from the students that indicated that they would have been more comfortable working on their respective locations after doing a group workshop for the first location in the novel. This would have provided a model to follow.

The main drawback of the project was that it was impossible to have the account open on multiple computers at the same time, which limited the potential for simultaneous collaborative work. However, we managed to achieve this by sharing the username and password and coordinating our schedules on the platform outside of class time.

Moreover, while the original plan had been to create a bilingual version of the site, we did not have enough time at the end of the semester to include a translation workshop for the students to complete the English version. In the future, it is necessary to plan out more time for student collaboration and translation during class time, in order to allow for a bilingual edition of the resulting map. While there was in-class group discussion centered on students' metacognitive learning, more time could have been allotted for student written metacognitive reflection. More time would have allowed, as well, for students' greater exploration of the animation possibilities allowed on the platform, leading to a slightly more elaborate and sophisticated end result.

While there were disadvantages and opportunities for improvement in the project, the result is multimodal (using images, primary and secondary sources), consequential, and will remain for posterity, visible and shareable with a real audience beyond the borders of the classroom. It is clear from student feedback and the result of their collaboration that students in "French Literature Before the Revolution" learned through independent research and a high-impact practice that required them to exercise responsibility, autonomy and agency in the process. Students learned through hands-on collaborative work, and became the teachers, as they presented their results to the group. Moreover, this learning occurred in a mode that became more meaningful to them than simply reading and analyzing the text through more traditional modes such as close reading. The mode of learning developed in this digital mapping project was interactive, aesthetically attractive, and echoes the exposition of the four pillars Eodice *et al* relate to meaningful writing: connections, authenticity, content learning, and research.

4. Conclusion

We recognize the benefits and possibilities of using platforms such as ArcGIS StoryMaps® to explore and map the 18th century, following the journey of protagonists in Voltaire's novella. Assignments of this nature make it more relevant to our students and provide them with a meaningful and impactful learning experience in which they are encouraged to draw on their creativity, sense of responsibility, and agency. This results in an engaging, authentic, and meaningful experience that fosters connections among the students in the classroom, and between the students and the text being analyzed. In our example, 21st-century students engaged actively in learning about the literature of the Early Modern era. We encourage colleagues to explore this or other interactive and collaborative platforms as a way to foster intellectual curiosity and allow our students to bridge the gap between past and present.

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