THE DIGITAL THINKER

New initiative joins classical education with cutting-edge technology

by Tyler Young

Since the invention of the alphabet, technologies have shaped how we learn, communicate and interact with the world around us. Where would the liberal arts be without paper, pens or the printing press? How would we share ideas if not for the invention of the telephone, the airplane or the internet?

As technology evolves at a dizzying pace in the 21st century, the liberal arts have had to reckon with what it means to be a free thinker and a problem solver. Today we have infinite ways to observe life's big questions and no shortage of means to discover their answers.

Unlocking those methods is at the heart of the mission of Transylvania's new Digital Liberal Arts initiative. Launched in the fall of 2017, the initiative is arming students and faculty with powerful tools—not just to teach them to be "techy," but to help them to effectively make connections, keep up with innovation and enhance the entire academic experience.

Digital Liberal Arts

"People hear 'Digital Liberal Arts' and think that it's a departure from traditional liberal education," says writing, rhetoric, and communication professor Kerri Hauman, who chairs the DLA initiative along with music technology professor Tim Polashek. "But the digital age is already here. This is just recognizing the qualities of liberal education to ask big questions about humanity and values and being productive citizens of the world—that's still what we're doing. We just need to be really good at making sure those types of questions are at the forefront of technological innovation."

So once Hauman and Polashek received their first grant from the Bingham Program for Excellence in Teaching, they began searching for how digital technologies could serve Transy's mission. They started by meeting with academic programs all over campus, from nearly every discipline, and asking, "What are you doing in your classrooms, and how can we help?" Those simple questions led to some eye-opening discoveries. Many of the programs that, at first glance, aren't associated with digital technology, have already begun these discussions in their curriculum.

A conversation with the sociology department revealed that sociology professor Brian Rich has been teaching a course on social media and mass culture for years. Spanish professors were interested in having students produce video projects. Over and over, the pair heard from faculty that they had never considered a Digital Liberal Arts initiative could make a real difference in their own classrooms, but then the ideas kept flowing.

"We have a lot more people thinking about digital technologies critically in their teaching," says Polashek. "We're not requiring anybody to do anything, but rather we want to support faculty where they are. There is a lot of discussion for more support for quantitative learning and expression. A lot of that involves analysis and manipulation of data. We want all of our students to get better at that."

Consulting with Others

As Hauman and Polashek gathered information on campus, they began searching off campus for ideas that could work for Transylvania. They talked with other schools who had set up Digital Liberal Arts centers to see what they were doing. They spoke with local companies who were interested in partnering with Transylvania in the effort. And they went through a training program at Miami University to learn to lead Faculty Learning Communities, semester-long discussion and training groups where professors learn how to incorporate digital technologies into their teaching and brainstorm ways to implement them. They held the first learning community in winter term 2018 and worked

with a consultant from the University of Kentucky's Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching to help lead the group and develop the projects the professors worked on.

In the meantime, a second Bingham grant was funding upgrades to technologies all around campus. The renovation of the Carpenter Academic Center allowed for the installation of new classroom technologies like Mondopads, large screens that function as individual computers. They allow for 4K video, web browsing, collaborative presentations, video conferencing and more. After visiting KET, Polashek designed a video capture studio complete with a camera, lights and a green screen that was installed in the basement of Cowgill, as was a full podcasting studio. The Digital Art Lab was upgraded with new computers and professional software, as well as studio-quality music recording equipment.

In July, Transy hired Gabrielle Read Jasnoff as digital content and technology integration specialist. Her position, also funded by a Bingham grant, is meant to ease the transition to digital technologies and help train faculty on how to use all the new gear. She has already worked with this term's Faculty Learning Community, as well as several other faculty members on how to use the Mondopads and where they can integrate other digital technologies into the curriculum.

"I try to encourage not just replacing technology," Jasnoff says. "It's not just using a Mondopad instead of a whiteboard, but rather what can a Mondopad do that we couldn't have

done with a whiteboard? What can we do to increase that collaborative interaction and experience for the students?

"When students get out in the real world with their careers, they're interacting with these technologies in so many different ways. It's important to prepare them for interacting with the tools they need to be successful in their lives after Transy. It's important to give them exposure and the skills that will make them stand out." Even though the initiative is just beginning its second year, the benefits to the students are already taking shape.

Connecting with Scholars

Hauman connected junior Will Shelton with Patrick Lewis '06, managing editor of scholarly resources and publications at the Kentucky Historical Society, who is working on the Civil War Governors of Kentucky project, which is digitizing tens of thousands of historical documents related to Kentucky's three Civil War governors and creating digital resources for teachers and historians. Shelton started an internship with KHS to help with the project in September. He's aiding in the research and annotating the documents online, and eventually the history major will be able to help put the pieces together by blogging and creating lesson materials.

"I really like the idea of making history accessible," he says. "For people to see their own lives reflected in something from

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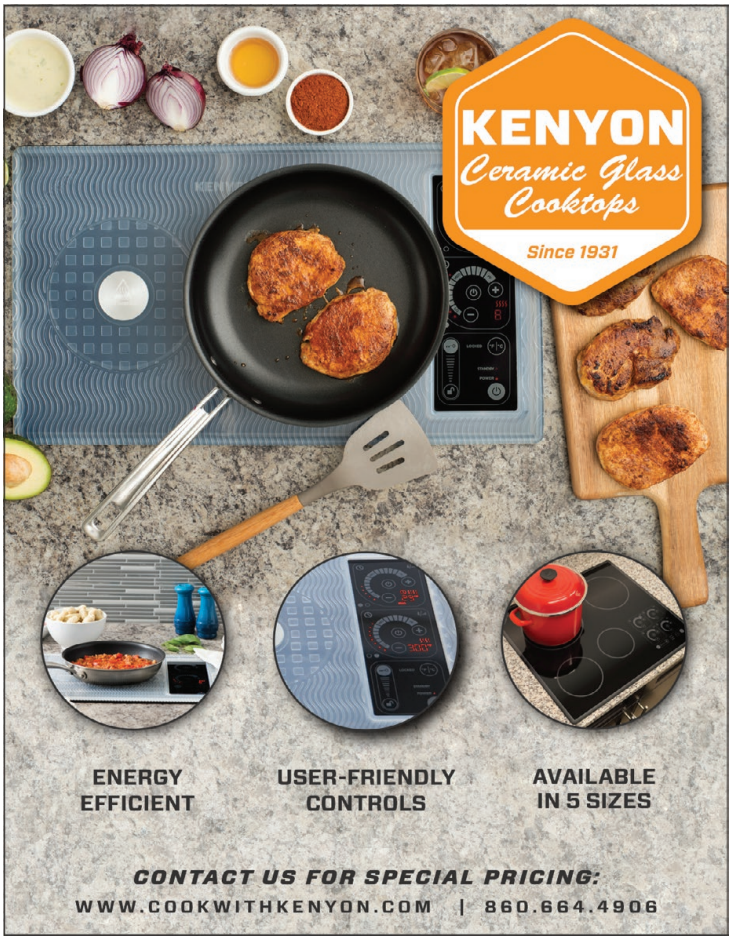
the past is really cool. It's taking all this dense material and turning it into something that can be accessible to teachers and universities."

"Everything is digital. Being able to do research and know how to use all the different web resources is really important. If I'm going to go into this field, I'm going to need the experience and knowledge to use it."

As the Digital Liberal Arts initiative continues to influence more of the campus, Hauman and Polashek expect the community to take its role in educating students to heart and for Transylvania to be a leader in integrating the liberal arts and technology in this age.

"'Digital' is a complicated term, and 'the liberal arts' is a complicated phrase," Hauman says. "But we're purposefully putting these two complicated ideas together because we believe it's important for digital culture and liberal education to inform each other. Eventually we'll be able to drop the word 'digital' because it will just be what we're doing here."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Tyler Young is a communications specialist in marketing at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. He earned B.A. degrees in journalism and Spanish from Asbury University.



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