

Place-Based Digital Humanities Programming for Middle-School Aged Participants

<https://eaststlouisculture.siue.edu/omeka/>

History of the Project

Digital East St. Louis, a three-year, NSF-funded project, engaged students in grades 6-9 in the creation of a content-rich, digital humanities website about the history and culture of their city.

A collaboration between Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's [STEM Center](#) and the [IRIS Center for the Digital Humanities](#), the program, which met over a three year period for five weeks during the summer and for sixteen Saturdays during each school year, encouraged newfound interest in technology among African American students via a place-based approach to the digital humanities.

Students learned about their city while gaining valuable technological skills, including:

- Videography
- Video Editing
- Web Design and Development
- Sound Editing
- Podcasting
- Computer Programming
- Metadata Standards

Place-Based Learning

Place-based education is the study of a place (local or regional) using a pedagogy that emphasizes students asking questions, solving real-world problems, and using field work to gather information in a local setting (Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2004; Semken, 2005; Semken & Freeman, 2008; Endreny, 2010). Gruenewald (2003) argued that “place-based pedagogies are needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit” (p. 3). Place-based educators promote a pedagogy that “relates directly to student experience of the world, and that improves the quality of life for people and communities (p. 7).”

Digital East St. Louis takes the stance that place-based learning in an urban environment empowers students to connect to their community and increases student engagement and understanding. Urban settings offer equally rich learning opportunities to rural settings through examination of the relationship between humans and the built environment and cultural and environmental city histories. Such learning also has the potential to contribute to community well-being. In the case of Digital East St. Louis, students reported increasing their knowledge about the community and its history. Anecdotally, students often shared that they took more pride in their community, and that they relished sharing their own stories about East St. Louis with others who only heard negative opinions about their city and its occupants.

The Digital Humanities

The digital humanities and social sciences is an innovative methodology for analyzing longstanding research questions in related fields. This digital research is often interdisciplinary in nature. It can involve the creation of dynamic scholarly archives or the development of new digital tools for analyzing languages, literature, images, spaces, and historical periods. These projects use the digital medium to offer audiences new insights. The digital humanities and social sciences foster an overlap between theory and method. They allow students to tackle complex questions via digital project design while providing them with cutting edge applied skills to take with them into professional environments.

The Digital East St. Louis project combined the digital humanities with a place-based approach to interest students in content first in order to inspire their use of digital tools. For instance, one participant realized that a map/timeline combination would be the best visual and interactive approach for demonstrating the local school district's history. Another group realized that a google map could be an appropriate way to display the quality of water sample they had taken throughout the city. In this way, students explore their interest in technology in order to most effectively share what they have learned about content with others.

A Word or Two about Content

We have designed this curriculum into modular units so teachers, youth group organizers, and after-school program coordinators can pick and choose activities based on interest. Though the place-based model was a central element of our project design, any topic that gets students excited about using technology to communicate with others is a useful place to start. For example, two recent uses for the curriculum in different programs have adapted the content to focus on audio remixes of African American poetry, visual remixes of images from the film *Black Panther*, and podcasts about school sports. As a group, we had the most success when participants had some freedom in choosing topics that mattered to them and what methods they would use to share them with broader audiences.