

Image-Driven Scholarship and the MIT Visualizing Cultures Project
Professor John Dower, History Professor at MIT and Scott Shunk, Program Director

MIT history professor John Dower and program director Scott Shunk discussed lessons learned from five years of developing an innovative educational platform called Visualizing Cultures.

Dr. Dower began the presentation by explaining that he was, in fact, a historian and did not have a technology background. He became a collaborator on the Visualizing Cultures project because he was interested in how technology could be used for education and outreach. In particular, Dr. Dower was interested in image-driven scholarship and changing the way humanists and scholars approach scholarly work. He explained that media images shared in the classroom do not only illustrate what the professor is presenting, but that these images have their own trajectory. Dr. Dower emphasized that technological advances have created new opportunities to integrate the use of images in the classroom.

Dr. Dower discussed the origin of Visualizing Cultures, recalling that MIT introduced open courseware in 2002, which made the school's course material accessible to anyone. Dr. Dower and his research team believed that the open courseware format would be beneficial to Visualizing Cultures and began developing content for the project's first unit on Japan. He explained that Japan was chosen because it was his area of expertise.

Dr. Dower then spoke about the inception of the Visualizing Cultures, beginning with the challenges in resource collection. He explained that it is easier to work with older historical images because they often lack copyright issues. Currently, the Visualizing Cultures team at MIT is transitioning to collecting 20th century images. They have also sought out partnerships with organizations that already have rights to images, allowing MIT to avoid attaining such rights.

Dr. Dower explained the significant challenge of convincing people that images made available to the public for no cost is not a zero-sum game. He mentioned that institutions consider their image collections proprietary, indispensable information. However, Dr. Dower asserted that this was a revolutionary time and that providing images online was different than giving them away for free. He commented that some people were concerned that books would not sell if contents were published online, and then jokingly claimed that book sales were already meager in his field. On a more serious note, Dr. Dower argued that making these images available online could actually draw attention to published material, making it a win-win situation for everyone.

When he began the project, Dr. Dower wanted a unique way to integrate text and visual materials. He was discouraged by initial conversations with developers who said that the Visualizing Cultures text was not flexible on the Web, especially in a way that it could be formatted aesthetically. However, the technical team was able to overcome this barrier and made way for significant pedagogical breakthroughs. Dr. Dower explained that each unit took about six months to create once the lawyers completed the intellectual property process. Over time,

Visualizing Cultures has sought out even more partnerships with museums and institutions, like the Smithsonian and the Museum of Fine Arts, which have access to existing digitized images and, therefore, reduce the workload on the Visualizing Cultures team.

Dr. Dower then demonstrated how a unit works, presenting the site's three major components; a core exhibit, videos, and an essay. The core exhibit includes various images surrounded by pertinent text. The videos are introductions of the exhibits and include other relevant historical information. Finally, there is a scholarly essay related to the topical area.

During his demonstration, Dr. Dower pointed out a 35-foot scroll that is only available in limited view on the Visualizing Cultures site. Accessed through a partnership with Honolulu Museum, the scroll is comprised of 35 separate slides that make one continuous image, which can be parsed into separate panels. Dr. Dower explained how the stories, and small bits of information provided with the visual image of the scrolls, allow for commentary that is not accessible in a museum. In a way, the online forum brings the museum to life. The online exhibits have also led to collaboration with museums on reverse engineering projects where installations are made based on the Web sites.

Dr. Dower then took the audience through the deconstruction of a wood block print, which was a popular art form in Japan. The tool allows you to deconstruct the woodblock image to see how it would have been created. Each image in the woodblock replication has been parsed and users can watch how an artist might have created the final product.

Dr. Dower continued to discuss the benefits to the Visualizing Cultures project, noting that the project differed from other image-based Web sites because of its high quality and informational content. He observed that some Web sites looked like someone had dumped a shoebox of old photographs onto a site. Dr. Dower decided early on that he wanted to give form and structure to historical photographs and provide answers to questions about different cultures.

With photography, Dr. Dower asserted, there is a movement into an area of subjectivity. Photographs are not necessarily representative of the reality on the ground. He explained how Westerners often only photograph non-Western images like old trades, traditional dress, temples, and other religious sites. However, Dr. Dower explained that the Visualizing Cultures project counters some of these one-sided views by collecting photographs taken by a wide range of photographers.

Dr. Dower provided one example of a photographer named Felice Beato, a foreign war photographer in Japan. Beato documented the Crimean War and later settled in Japan at a time when the old government was coming to a close, and the new government was coming to power. The Visualizing Archives project recreated his old photo albums, with the accurate captions and depictions of images. While showing these images, Dr. Dower pointed out that the online photographs are even easier to observe than the real images because the site allows users to pan and zoom-in on the image for close study.

Next, Dr. Dower spoke about ways to support pedagogy by providing databases to students. He noted that these comprehensive databases require students to apply interpretation skills, which

often lead to a discovery process for both student and professor. Dr. Dower asserted that the Visualizing Cultures project is a unique, new way to provide a resource for both teaching and scholarly research.

Dr. Dower also discussed how Visualizing Cultures benefited from private collections, like that of Leonard Lauder who had previously donated his collection of Japanese postcards to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. These postcards were produced in the early 1900s when multicolor printing became available and international postage made it possible to send post cards around the world. The postcards in the collection coincide with Japan's freedom from Russia in the Russo-Japanese War. Dr. Dower explained that the postcards give students and scholars intellectual latitude, enabling students to observe a single moment from different perspectives.

The discussion was then opened up for questions. One audience member asked how the Visualizing Cultures project helps Dr. Dower with his book about modern warfare. Dr. Dower responded that he is a 20th century scholar, despite the connection Visualizing Cultures has to the 19th century. However, he explained that he remains sensitive to perceptions of others, and recognizes that disillusion and misrepresentation usually wins out over the rational. He explained that his utmost concern lies with being able to see multiple perspectives through the lens of visual artifacts.

Another audience member asked whether the Visualizing Cultures team has collected any feedback about its use as a teaching resource and if the project contains any evaluation mechanisms. Dr. Dower responded that their team has received a feedback from high school teachers who were trained to use Visualizing Cultures. However, at the university level, the feedback they receive is purely anecdotal. Scott Shunk noted that they are currently in the midst of pushing out a broad evaluation of the program.

When asked how the project would progress, Dr. Dower explained that while he was in charge of writing most of the previous units, the archive has grown to include contributions from professors outside of MIT. Dr. Dower commented on some of the challenges for growing the project; while the project's growth could lead to increased use, not everyone considers this type of work serious scholarship and are, therefore, unwilling to contribute. Currently, the project's content is not peer-reviewed, like in traditional scholarly journals. Dr. Dower believed that this was an entire area that has yet to be defined, stressing that he would like scholars to receive credit for contributing to non-traditional scholarship like Visualizing Cultures.

One audience member was concerned with the issue of attribution of older photographs, especially those that might be mislabeled or missing information. Dr. Dower emphasized the importance of having multiple images, so that there is more support for a particular point. He also mentioned that everyone should use boilerplate language like "for use in this book" to clear usage rights at the beginning. Dr. Dower did agree that there are political pitfalls in this kind of work and noted that scholars should be aware of misidentifications and misattributions in photographs. He suggested that scholars build on information from established sites and generally be scrupulous with research techniques.

The final question was about whether the Visualizing Cultures project has developed support tools that help scholars or students in utilizing the data they find in these vast databases. Dr. Dower responded that the idea for the database is to show students various intellectual concepts, facilitate their usage of the database, and then ask what visual narratives they are able to identify. Dr. Dower mentioned that this process is fascinating because everyone comes up with completely stylized interpretations and can then critique one another. His team is concerned with giving students a frame and method for analysis, rather than creating tools for the site.

Scott Shunk also addressed the question of Web-based tools, explaining that the MIT team is in the business of developing databases within databases. He explained that to develop the tools by which students could author and share their interpretation of work is out of their scope. Dr. Dower added that his team seeks to provide students with a variety of assets, offering them access to a broader collection of images. However, he maintained that the Visualizing Cultures project was interested mainly in producing and sharing content. Dr. Dower concluded by stating that it would be great to support students as they create work and would love to see the day when students could use Visualizing Cultures to write papers that could be posted on the site, allowing them to contribute to the scholarship around these images.