

Lab Report

a newsletter of the Visual Media Workshop.

February 25, 2014. By Alexandra Oliver.

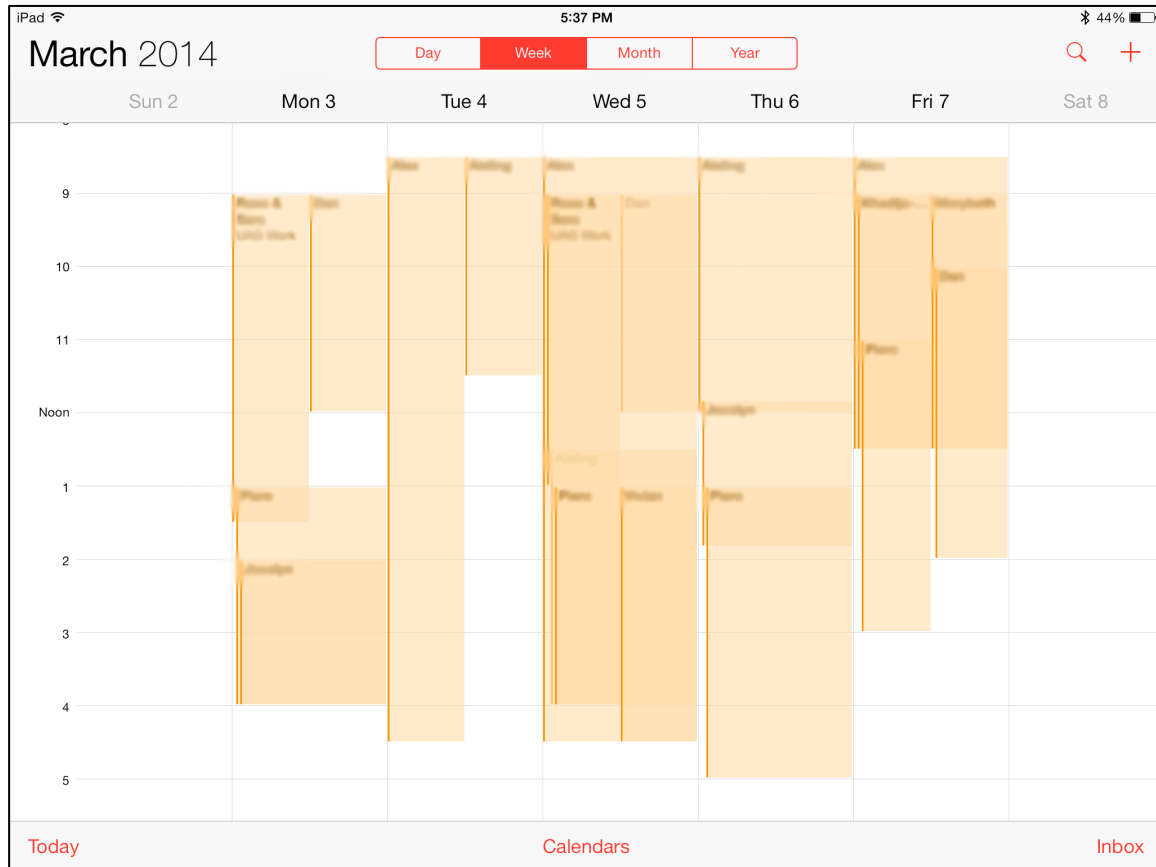


Figure 1 The staff work schedule for Spring 2014

On this mild Wednesday morning, Isabelle, Sarah and Rose are discussing usability testing for an e-book guide to art on campus. They toggle between iBooks author (the software tool they used to design the book) and their draft design, loaded on an iPad. Isabelle swipes across the glass screen, “turning” the virtual pages, and asking questions. The iBook contains just ten objects at the moment, including the terrifying weave of metal spikes crafted by Virgil Cantini that looms over pedestrians in Posvar. (You know the one.) But Rose and Sarah are thinking of adding still more objects, and architecture too. Their goal isn’t to reproduce the standard campus tour, but to enhance and enrich it.

At the next workstation, Liz Self is building a website using Dreamweaver, to replace the old site for the upcoming grad student symposium. Dan fixes a “double” login problem on a website. Others come in and out to scan, print, email, grab a laptop or laser-pointer to teach, to use gallery collections management software, or to ask about an unfamiliar

tech tool (Viewshare, anyone?). The Visual Media Workshop (aka, The Lab) supports all these activities, from casual (yes, you can batch scan all those European-size photocopies using our feed-scanner) to ambitious, longer-term research initiatives that blur the boundaries between humanities and information science, open new questions for cultural history, and are really just plain cool. Here's the short list of stuff we're working on:

Constellations website. Alison had a break-through over winter break (say that five times fast) and decided the constellations needed something more than a static website. She selected a design with a dynamic main page that both pools all content, permitting accidental juxtapositions across categories, but also allows for filtering. Click on "VMW" and you'll see only content in that category (ditto for projects like Configuring Disciplines, Itinera, etc.) There's also a long-awaited bibliography tool so we can collectively compile lists of what we're reading, according to constellation theme. Anyone can log in and blog, creating an easy and immediate digital publishing platform to document and extend the many conversations going on in our offices, classrooms, and the Carnegie Library Crazy Mocha. Break-through. <http://constellations.pitt.edu/>

Itinera. This project, which maps culturally-motivated travel in the eighteenth century, continues to grow. Currently Itinera is in "prototype" phase, which means it exists as a functioning model that can be used to build up the core concept, much like a first draft. Feedback so far has revealed both how much work has yet to be done and how powerfully it inspires new questions and possibilities for research. Interviewing users was like a high-level poker match: I see your broken data visualization feature and raise you an exciting new idea for improvement. Project leads are also investigating sources of funding to push it to the next stage. <http://itinera.whirl-i-gig.com/>

Decomposing Bodies. This collaboration deals with "Bertillonage," a criminal identification system that used photographs and detailed measurements of individuals' bodies. Developed by Alphonse Bertillon in Paris, it spread internationally in the late nineteenth-century. Starting with tips from Josh's book, Alex and Aisling tracked down preserved specimens of these ID cards in archives and libraries. Alison hoped initially to find, maybe 100-1000. But when Alison, Aisling and Josh arrived at the Ohio Historical Society Archives/Library, they found 40,000. Columbus, who knew? By scanning and scraping these fascinating objects for data, Josh hopes to gauge the accuracy of the system, learn more about American Bertillon processes, and consider the implications for current systems of surveillance, for which Bertillonage is the pre-history. <http://www.ohiohistory.org/>

Undergrad activities. The Lab hosts several work-study students each year. Last term, Karen worked on data entry for Itinera (and helpfully logged bugs as she went); this semester Dan returns (third year running) to help with Drupal, building Collective Access features, and is assisting Natalie build a database in Filemaker. Piero, who is planning on studying business but recently has found himself increasingly intrigued by Mexican

modernism, has been scanning and cataloguing the images to support teaching, including for Jennifer Josten and *all the pictures* from Terry Smith's textbook, *Contemporary Art: World Currents*. He's also been tapped to handle all our social media (more below). Two "First Experiences in Research" (FE-R) students were also sent over from the Office of Undergraduate Research, to do, well, undergraduate research. Alex has been supervising their introduction to research resources, the Grand Tour, Itinera, close reading, and data entry. Everyone laughs a lot and Alex has discovered that working through heavy interpretation problems collaboratively helps solve the problems faster. <http://www.asundergrad.pitt.edu/experience/first-experiences-research.html>

Grad activities. Aisling and Alex collaborate on all aspects of lab work, including the DH (digital humanities) initiatives, cataloguing, supervising undergrads, reviewing tech tools, and consulting as needed. Aisling has been working extensively on the new Drupal Constellations site, incorporating and updating new features as needs and interests arise. In addition, Aisling is supervising Vivian, an undergraduate researcher, in cataloguing and describing slide collections in the VMW. Aisling is also often consulted about various smaller-scale projects at the cross section of art history and information sciences, including the HAA2400 Configuring Disciplines course.

Alex has been working more intensely on Itinera, translating books into data, doing "QA" (quality assurance, like editing), and initiating Piero in the use of social media tools, which is essential for anyone who wants to survive in digital marketing. She has also been supervising two FE-R undergrad researchers, introducing them to DH methods and ideas.

HAA Twitter feed. The History of Art & Architecture now has a twitter feed! Find us at <https://twitter.com/haapitt>

The ecosystem. The Lab exists as a part of a larger ecosystem, extending beyond the HAA department, and even beyond the campus-wide DHRX, to the national conversation about the changing profile of the humanities in the age of digital hyperproduction. The Lab, now at three-years old, has become a unique hub of cross-disciplinary energy, where students, faculty and staff of all levels can engage not only with digital tools, but equally, with each other. www.dhrx.pitt.edu/