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A Rationale for Teaching Hypertext Authoring in Literature Courses

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Abstract: In this paper, I present an argument for why literature instructors might choose to incorporate hypertext authoring assignments into their courses. Because of its unfamiliarity to most students, hypertext authoring works well in defamiliarizing texts and enabling students to see the underlying markup in those hypertexts. By extension, students gain a first-hand look not only at hypertextuality but also at textuality more generally, which can then serve a variety of purposes in the teaching of literature.

The Problem

In the computer-assisted classroom, literature instructors find themselves in a strangely impoverished situation. While there has been a great deal of research and innovation in computers and writing, most of that has been directed towards serving composition and rhetoric classes, in which the advantages of teaching various forms of electronic writing have been well established. But aside from specific genre studies of various forms of electronic literature (e.g., hyperfiction using applications such as StorySpace), little has been said about why one would want to teach hypertext authoring specifically in a literature class.

In the Computer Writing and Research Lab (CWRL), instructors regularly offer lower-division literature courses, many of which were designed specifically for the networked environment (the several variants of E 314L, including "Contexts and Contests," "Banned Books and Novel Ideas," and "Poesis: The Making of Literature," for example) as well as others that have been adapted to the electronic classroom. Yet these instructors are often asked by their colleagues questions like, "Why would you want students to write web pages in a lit class?" The assumption is that unless you are teaching students

to write hypertext as a goal of the course, it isn't worth the time required to do it; another assumption is that literature courses should not have as a goal teaching students to write hypertext. So not only do instructors face a dearth of scholarship in the discipline, they also face bewilderment, if not outright resistance, in their institutions.

Perceptions and Misperceptions

Of course, in most literature courses it is probably not the goal to teach students to author hypertext documents; however, doing so can actually serve the goals of the course, which in the most general sense is to help students develop their literacy skills or, as I like to put it, to teach them to read. Students who enroll in the CWRL's sophomore-level courses typically think they know how to read already, but the point of these courses is in part to familiarize students with critical approaches to literature that they are likely to encounter in upper-division offerings. In other words, students need to learn new perspectives from which to study texts and new methodologies that they may employ in their further studies. They are learning to make different distinctions in texts from those they are accustomed to making; and making distinctions in texts is the very definition of reading.

What makes this process difficult for many instructors is overcoming the students' belief that they already know how to read. And of course students do know how to read, in one sense; but they often do not know how to read *literature,* which requires a different set of distinctions from the ones they usually use. In order to make it clear that their everyday reading lenses (i.e., their usual sets of distinctions) may not be sufficient for the texts at hand—be they Shakespeare, Dickens, Dillard, or whatever—I have found it helpful to require students to use a different lens by necessity. Creating hypertext documents requires exactly this kind of noticeable difference: hypertext documents such as web pages are familiar enough to most students, but they are sufficiently different that the medium is not yet transparent, especially on the authoring side. Of course, the computer-assisted classroom can provide ample resources for the creation and experience of hypertext (in addition to ready access to online research sites and handy presentation mechanisms, for which the CA environment seems to be in great demand).

Considerations of Method

As with any learning activity, how hypertext authoring is framed for and presented to the students makes a great deal of difference in its pedagogical effectiveness. Students need to know not only what they are doing but also why they are doing it (although they don't need to

know *all* the reasons).

In the service of teaching literature, I have had success by coupling the activity with the subject of the course. For instance, as part of my intro-to-the-major poetry survey, I made use of a hypertext annotation project on T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in the CWRL's text-based MOO (Multi-user-domain, Object Oriented). The purpose of the assignment was to elucidate the obscure references and allusions in the poem by researching them and presenting them in the MOO. I justified the connection between poem and hypertext through discussion of Eliot's own use of footnotes, which are simply an old-fashioned kind of hyperlink. Once the analogy had been established, then the activity alone could produce all kinds of insights on both sides of the analogy—that is, not just about how building objects and spaces in the MOO works, but also about how annotation and allusion and reference work within poetic and literary texts.[1]

The link between text and hypertext in the Eliot project is relatively apparent. But I would argue that the link between the two is there in the case of any literary text and any hypertext format you would care to use. Literary texts and hypertexts are both kinds of *text,* and as Jerome McGann points out in *Radiant Textuality*, texts are always already *marked* as texts.[2] In traditional print formats (e.g., novels, poems, essays) the markings have become transparent to us. We think nothing of the conventions of reading, such as beginning at the top left corner of the leftmost page and reading from left to right on each line, with new sentences beginning with a capital letter and new paragraphs with a spatial break of some kind (first-line indentation or line space). Indeed, one of the justifications for the study of foreign languages and literatures is to show by way of contrast what our own cultural, linguistic, and other assumptions are. Hypertext is like a foreign language in that its markup structures differ from those of traditional (literary) texts but are still recognizable as textual structures, but unlike it in that the knowledge and experience required to work in hypertext formats is significantly less than that required for a foreign language.

The critical element, then, in incorporating a hypertext authoring project into a literature course is to get students to examine the markup, and connect it with the concept of markup in what they perceive as "normal" or "unmarked" text. Web pages are ideally suited for this kind of activity, since the very term HTML includes "markup" (HyperText Markup Language). In order to create a web page, even with a high-end WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) tool such as Macromedia Dreamweaver MX, you still have to know something about tagging and document sections in order to troubleshoot problems. Web browsers (another fortunate term) will "read" HTML and display it for humans in various ways.

[1] My essay describing the Eliot hypertext MOO annotation project in detail, "*The Waste Land* In, Not Of, the MOO," is forthcoming in an essay collection entitled *Metaphors of Cyberspace*, edited by Caroline Maun.

[2] Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

At this point in the presentation, you could begin a discussion of web design standards and accessibility guidelines, or of audience and ethos matters, if you were in a computers and writing course or an argumentation course. But for literature courses, the important point to press is that without the markup, the text is meaningless. And what counts as markup is dependent on the *browser,* not the document. In other words: readers make distinctions in texts, and if something is not a distinguished element for the browser, then it may not be interpreted properly, if at all, on the displayed page. Thus browsers can be considered particularly obtuse "readers."

Similarly, if readers do not perceive a textual element as distinct, then that element cannot be interpreted. This fact explains the feeling so many students have when they hear an explication of a text they have read but not understood well: it feels as if the dawn breaks over them, or a wave comes down on them, or some other pertinent metaphor that describes the feeling of illumination and revelation of seeing something that was right there in front of them, if they only had the perspective to see it "correctly." They have to learn how to *mark* the text, in the Elizabethan sense of the word ("Mark my words"). This marking can be on many levels, from typographic to taxonomic, but no matter at what level, it still comes down to making distinctions in texts, to marking texts.

Conclusion

The process of marking up a hypertext provides the necessary defamiliarization of the text that enables students to look *at* the markup structures instead of simply looking *through* them. Once they are able to see the markup in hypertext, they are more easily able to see the markup in the literature which the course presumably has at its center. In this way, the time spent teaching web design or MOO-building or StorySpace pays great dividends, even in contexts in which the payoff is not at first apparent. In fact, teaching hypertext authoring is really just teaching textuality in a practical way, and in my experience students gain the most from these types of activities.

The same points about textuality could, of course, be made with the markup in any word processor, or just in the markup in a printed book; but since those have become transparent to most of us, students will have a more difficult time internalizing them. The hands-on nature of the authoring task provides an encounter with textuality that reading alone cannot. For these reasons literature instructors have long asked their students to write essays discussing the texts in the course: we want students to have to formulate their ideas about a work in writing and thus to refine and shape those ideas more precisely and more fully. And since literature students often do

not know how to make the best distinctions in a text (i.e., they do not know how to read it very well), the writing they produce on these assignments tends to be unfocused, vague, and uninteresting. The very unfamiliarity of hypertext writing, however, causes students to confront the fundamental issues traditional essays often gloss over as assumed. By grappling with those issues in hypertext form, students are better equipped to transfer those skills into their traditional writing and reading, and thus into their understanding of literature and literacy more generally. This is, I hope, what we are all seeking to help our literature students accomplish in our courses.