

## Infusing Bibliography and Book History with Hyper-Textuality: A Course for Undergraduates

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### Introduction

Hunter College, on Manhattan's Upper Eastside, is a four-year senior college in the CUNY system, which attracts top students in arts and humanities from all over the United States. While teaching as a fellow there, I designed and taught a course based in bibliography and book history for students inundated with digital 'texts'. In designing 'Technology and Textuality: Converting *Literature* to the Digital Medium', a course of an intensive summer session, I began with the following pedagogical questions:

- How do we teach our students about print culture and early forms of literature when they're inundated with faster information and media formats?
- How do I engage digitally sophisticated students who use Google as a verb (or even now as a scholarly resource)?
- Would these students recognize digital documents and interactive sites as *texts*?
- And, could they produce their own versions of these *texts*?

This is a much abbreviated version of the description I provided students:

This course will explore the movement between visual culture and literary culture by examining literary works that have been anthologized, removed from the original presentation or publication form and recently digitized into online hypertexts. Students will explore the visual presentation of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* as they were originally published in the

1790s, as well as looking at the textual importance of reading *Lyrical Ballads* (first edition, 1798) in its original order. We'll make a trip to Special Collections to see the evolution of the codex format before we move to current representations of literature as both archived documents and as hypertextual texts that incorporate the reader into the writing experience. We will also look at ongoing, interactive, user-centered websites, including blogs and Wikipedia, creating our own online discussions along the way. We will briefly cover textual theory, history of the book and bibliographic theory (i.e., analyses of how a book is constructed) in order to discuss the efficacy of digital literature. Though for our course, we'll look most closely at the web pages, digital archives and hypertexts for nineteenth-century works, the focus of the course can be applied to any historical period. We will explore the Internet to find 20th- and 21st-century representations of digital literature and even create our own. (Basic web design instruction will be conducted during some class meetings). You will never look at a book the same way again!

In our six-week session, we barely had enough time to read the theory and scholarship, absorb the readings to facilitate discussions surrounding the implications of bibliography, history of the book and textual studies *and* learn enough HTML to build representations of our modern digital literary selves. So I warned the students that our material would cover a huge theoretical and historical breadth: they were going to consider not only the printed word in literature, but also the ephemeral space of digital technology – both on the Internet and in popular culture – as it impacted a literary text as well as each student's own cultural capital. Though we began the

course with a study of bibliographical methods and print history, we did not limit ourselves to the study of digitizing literary documents. Instead, our discussions were always infused with the cultural, social and economic phenomena surrounding the creation of a text, both in its physical manifestation and digital renderings. This led to discussing ourselves and our experiences as *texts* using semiotic analysis. Students eventually arrived at the conclusion that the virtual world is not discrete from real life but is an extension: with every handwritten word and every visited website, each person creates a unique consciousness as reader, writer, author, participant, user or contributor. This, of course, required a complex definition of *text* and *textuality*.<sup>1</sup>

### Brief Overview of Course Content

Even though these students had never encountered the literary theory examining digital literature, I resisted the urge to lecture extensively. Instead I set up a seminar-style course that incorporated lecture with discussions and in-class writing, both formal and informal, to facilitate learning (I'll discuss the writing component later in this essay). There were no in-class tests or quizzes. To emphasize the digital, we used Blackboard to extend discussions, offer suggestions, define terms, post assignments, view PowerPoint slideshows and provide hyperlinks. One or two days each week were reserved for working in computer labs.

### Guiding Questions

What is a book? What is an author? What is literature? What is an archive? What is a hypertext? and What is a cyborg? These were the questions we examined across the course of the semester. Students traced the development of bibliographic ideas by exploring bibliographic

theory. Theorists and major ideas included the following:

- Lachman Method (instinct)
- Sir Walter Greg (copy-text)
- R.B. McKerrow (1928; New Bibliography)
- Fredson Bowers (1949; eclectic editing)
- D.F. McKenzie (1966; sociology of the text)
- Thomas Tanselle (authorial intention)
- Jerome McGann (textual condition and hypertext)
- Roland Barthes (scriptor)
- Michel Foucault (author-function)
- Walter Benjamin (aura)
- Jacques Derrida (archive)
- Donna Haraway (cyborg).

For readings, we relied primarily on David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery's *Book History Reader* (2003), but we also found extremely useful Evelyn Tribble and Anne Trubek's advanced composition reader, *Writing Material: Readings from Plato to the Digital Age*, because it contained articles on virtual life and hypertextuality. See course schedule for a complete list of readings.

To answer our guiding questions, students considered the works of three authors: William Blake, William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge. We looked at facsimile printings to question scholarly editions and their potential contamination in William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* and Routledge's edition of the first three versions of *The Lyrical Ballads* by

William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. We coupled these versions and states with literary texts already converted into hypertexts, such as the following:

- The Anna L. Barbauld Archive ([www.usask.ca/english/barbauld/](http://www.usask.ca/english/barbauld/))
- *Lyrical Ballads: An Electronic Scholarly Edition* ([www.rc.umd.edu/editions/LB/](http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/LB/))
- The Blake Archive ([www.blakearchive.org](http://www.blakearchive.org))
- Forget Me Not Hypertextual Archive ([www.orgs.muohio.edu/anthologies/FMN/](http://www.orgs.muohio.edu/anthologies/FMN/))
- The Rossetti Archive ([www.rossettiarchive.org/](http://www.rossettiarchive.org/))
- The Spectator Archive ([meta.montclair.edu/spectator/](http://meta.montclair.edu/spectator/))

These hypertextual projects represent some of the best scholarly efforts to transform literature into a hypertextual and hypermedia environment.

We also explored websites that were not scholarly projects and relied on anonymous users to contribute content, including the following:

- Mr. Beller's Neighborhood ([www.mrbellersneighborhood.com/](http://www.mrbellersneighborhood.com/))
- UBU Web ([www.ubu.com/](http://www.ubu.com/))
- The September 11 Digital Archive ([www.911digitalarchive.org/](http://www.911digitalarchive.org/))
- Hypertext & Mass Media  
([english.ttu.edu/kairos/2.2/response/kirschenbaum/bluemink/intro1.htm](http://english.ttu.edu/kairos/2.2/response/kirschenbaum/bluemink/intro1.htm)).

### Getting Into Course Content

Our ultimate goal was to investigate and create digital literature, so we spent only one or two class meetings overviewing bibliographic and editorial procedures, including analytical vs. descriptive bibliography, copy text, eclectic editing, authorial intention and sociology of the text.

We then focused on Robert Darnton's 'The Heresies of Bibliography' (*New York Review of Books* 50.9 [2003]: 43-45) which provides an extensive history of bibliography. Despite Darnton's clear and articulate writing style, students were perplexed and remarked that the four-page article seemed to have been written in a foreign language. I assured them that Darnton's terms would become clearer as we had more hands-on exercises and lectures surrounding bibliography and book history.

The following week, students handled various versions of the traditional codex form in a presentation by Fales Library curators. With this, students were able to understand the necessity of editorial theory – especially as they greedily handled cuneiform, papyrus, a volume of *The Nuremberg Chronicle* (1492), *History of Henry IV* (1611), *Pamela* (1740), stereotype editions, serialized novels and handmade paper. The physicality of these texts moved them from an abstract discussion into a world of books that they had never encountered. With this presentation, we were able to move into theorizing this idea of the book, text and work.

### Writing about Theory and Practice

Meeting every day to discuss the readings or work on the hypertextual project actually allowed students to make better connections because the readings, students focused strongly on theories and theorists surrounding bibliographic issues. Students moved from Greg's bibliographic theories to the discussion surrounding Tanselle's authorial intention, Foucault's author-function and how hypertextuality's lack of boundaries complicated bibliography's borders. To stimulate critical thinking skills, students wrote during the first twenty minutes of two classes each week. The in-class response papers gauged reading comprehension, reader response and critical thinking

skills. Though I allowed students to use their books, they soon found that this was not helpful because the questions generally required a response that was more than summary – and those who hadn't read couldn't quickly skim the material *and* comment sufficiently. To help students improve, each week I distributed examples of effective students responses (including my comments) as well as handouts giving writing advice. Most students expressed anxiety about these graded in-class writings – some even going so far as to say they *hated* it. However, 70% of students improved their writing, and most acknowledged the overall benefit since the CUNY system requires university-wide writing assessment.

By the second week, we were spending two full days per week in a computer lab viewing, discussing and critiquing other hypertextual Web projects as well as practicing HTML coding and web design. This time was not unilaterally spent staring off into cyberspace, though. Students became accustomed to posting a response to the discussion board in the first fifteen minutes of class.

The Blackboard discussion board tracked users and views so I could tell who was reading and responding to others and often encouraged students to read each other's posts. (In fact, we sometimes used the board as a class resource.). I considered the posts informal writing prompts that encouraged students to think about their understanding of the readings or theories. The posts also rehearsed some definition or element that would be part of a later in-class response prompt. The board also allowed me to gauge their understanding of the lecture material and revisit certain theories in class if the posts indicated frustration or struggle.

Using the discussion board allowed students more time to engage with the prompt. Though our in-class prompts were restricted to twenty minutes, the discussion board posts

could be completed over the weekend or before the next class meeting. The discussion board also facilitated self-learning outside the classroom, which was essential to the ultimate goals of the course.

Another use of the discussion board involved students peer reviewing group presentations. Presenters then spent a few moments responding to the posts and expanding on any information that might have been excluded from the presentation. This very public critique forced students to analyze the amount of information offered as well as the coherence of the overall presentation. They also had to practice writing balanced critiques, which was useful in thinking about their own presentations.

By the end of the semester, the discussion board had a large cache of information that served as a collective reader-response journal, peer review and HTML tips. With the discussion board posts, I found that students respected each other's thoughts and became intimately acquainted with one another through their digital selves – despite the fact that they sat around quietly for twenty minutes just inches apart from each other. In the context of this course, each writing component had different goals: the discussion board emphasized revision, while the in-class prompts emphasized critical thinking. See sample discussion questions for examples of in-class writing and bulletin board prompts.

### Major Assignments: The Group Presentation

The first major element, the Group Presentation (see assignment), gave students an idea about different types of hypertextual projects that are live on the Web. It also gave them a chance to look at the content selection, design elements and navigation tools used to complete a

successful hypertextual archive and to begin to formulate their own content and design criteria to be included in the Rationale Essay. To involve the audience, students gathered in their groups and were responsible for asking questions about the presentation. The presentation itself involved comparing two sites:

Group 1: The William Blake Archive vs. UBU Web

Group 2: Hypertext & Mass Media vs. The Spectator Archive

Group 3: The Rossetti Archive vs. The September 11 Digital Archive

In order to evaluate and review both hypertextual projects, students had to consider both content and design. By this time, they had acquired the vocabulary to discuss bibliographic details for a hypertext and were asked to consider the following issues for each site:

- Purpose
- Bibliographic details of original texts vs. digital representations
- Navigation
- Usability
- Visual design

Then, they compared all of these elements between the two hypertexts to assess the sites. These issues ideally modeled the requirements of their own hypertextual projects. To help in assessing websites, I posted several guides, including 'Questions to Ask for Constructing a Hypertext', 'Keywords', 'How to Separate Good Data from Bad' (*New York Times* article), and various online resources. See Course Schedule for all links.

During the presentation, each group member had to include a quote, theory, model, etc. from at least one article from class discussions. After their fifteen-minute presentation, each

group member submitted a typed outline as well as a formal works cited list. I assigned two grades: one based on a group performance and a second based on individual contribution to the presentation. All presentations occurred in the computer lab and were supplemented by various websites.

### Major Assignments: The Hypertextual Project

All of these discussions and explorations surrounding bibliography, book history, textuality and hypertextuality eventually led students to create a hypertextual project in stages.

When they weren't posting and listening to presentations in the computer lab, students focused on learning HTML – a difficult task considering that most of the students had absolutely no web design skills. Many expressed trepidation at learning the theoretical language of the course as well as HTML, also a complex language. They had to essentially become critical thinkers not only about literature, criticism and theory but also about virtual representations.

To facilitate their immersion in HTML, I would provide brief tutorials in various aspects of basic web design. For example, our first week involved an initial HTML exercise in WebMonkey ([www.webmonkey.com](http://www.webmonkey.com)), a tutorial which provided exercises in the basics of bracketing codes and creating paragraphs. As they attempted designing on their own, I walked around the room offering help and overseeing their progress. We began our HTML tutorials in Word and moved into Frontpage and Dreamweaver as the projects became more complex and the students became adept at basic HTML design such as constructing tables, which is an essential component for constructing a controllable space.

Students periodically provided a written update on the progress of their Web projects,

the design selections, the theories incorporated, etc. This writing was ultimately geared toward constructing the rationale which was submitted as a formal essay at the end of the semester. As students presented their final projects during the last week of class, the audience members were again required to ask questions and write a review. However, this time, each student's handwritten review was kept private and was graded for its ability to evaluate each hypertextual project.

Students became editors by selecting, annotating, hyperlinking or creating the visual and literary works. In addition, they soon became those things they had studied: archivist, archon, scriptor, artist. They began to make connections both about the theoretical methodologies and their roles in creating hypertexts. Some focused on biography or a particular literary form while others choose to create interpretative works that mixed literature with 'Literature'. We spent some time discussing the difference between simply re-presenting a biography or a historical text in mimicry of its printed counter-part and constructing a unique, hypertextual project that allowed for multiple linearity in the reading experience. Students were able to answer key questions by the time their hypertextual projects were completed and used these responses to construct a written rationale.

## Conclusion

At the outset, I promised students that they would never look at a 'text' the same after completing this course. Though English majors, very few had questioned the authority or construction of the anthologies, the transmission of texts or the existence of a fast-paced digital world. During the final week, one student wrote, 'I have begun to view all text in a different

manner than I ever did before. Every time I look at a book, I think of its bibliographic code and whether or not it accurately represents the authorial intention, especially reproduced works of dead authors'.

Throughout the course, students discovered that neither print nor digital were superior. They were stunned that their literature anthologies contained hardly any textual information regarding the authority of the copy-text. While reviewing hypertextual projects (scholarly and non-scholarly), they were often frustrated with the mediocre organization and confusing navigation of these public sites. Their analyses of both media forms were helpful in constructing their own hypertextual projects as well as exhibiting the inherent relationship between traditional and non-traditional studies of 'text'.

The projects resulting from this merging of bibliographic theory, research of hypertexts on the web, and consistent writing about their readings and researches were incredibly innovative and surprisingly complex. Two exemplary projects employed the hyper-ness of hypertextual and created projects that were more than informational. Each allows the user to construct a narrative based on a unique reading. Though both projects contain coding, typographical and mechanical writing errors, they represent what was completed as well as what could have been done:

1. 'KrazyKat'

Here, a student took a cartoon strip and created several layers of discourse, an attempt at stream of consciousness reading. In the interest of providing information, the student presents a brief biography of the cartoonist, which detracts from the conscious choice to let users roam. Though the hyperlinking and visual details are rudimentary, this student actually applied Foucault and Barthes'

theories about the author to her project. Available at

[www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/StudentProjects/Student\\_KrazyKat/krazyindex.htm](http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/StudentProjects/Student_KrazyKat/krazyindex.htm)

2. 'Modern and Traditional Fairytales'

In this project, a student linked original and modern versions of fairy tales through authors. She reproduced the text of some popular tales and added commentary to address things like mothers and stepmothers. The most interesting pages are the charts comparing versions of 'Cinderella' and 'Little Red Riding Hood'. Available at [www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/StudentProjects/Student\\_FairyTales/WebProject/INDEX.htm](http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/harris/StudentProjects/Student_FairyTales/WebProject/INDEX.htm)

### Explanatory Notes

<sup>1</sup> Much of this course was based on a paper delivered at the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Humanities Conference, "The New Information Order and the Future of the Archive" (University of Edinburgh). A conference version – "Fantasies of Containment: Archiving Moments in Cyber- and Real-Life" – was published in the March 2002 Conference Proceedings ([www.iash.ed.ac.uk/proceedings/harris/harris.pdf](http://www.iash.ed.ac.uk/proceedings/harris/harris.pdf)), and an article on this topic is forthcoming Caroline Maun's edited collection, *Metaphors of Cyberspace*.