

Digital Rib:
Changing Behaviour and Hypertext Literature

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This paper examines changing behaviour of both students and professor as they use digital technology in the delivery of three literature courses at Athabasca University. First, I should explain that Athabasca is the major open and distance learning institution in Canada with about 30,000 students annually. We began operation in 1971, one year after the British Open University. The majority of our courses are offered year-round. Students can begin courses on the first day of every month. This means that students work on their own, following their own schedule and at their own pace. We have no students on campus, no classrooms, no lecture halls. The campus is the student's own home and the classroom his or her computer. Some colleagues might call us a virtual university, which has an aura of unreality, but I have never thought of Athabasca in such terms since the students, courses and literary texts are all very real to me. The three courses and procedures that I describe below must be looked at in the context of year-round enrolment and the great flexibility which the new technology allows. We take asynchrony for granted.

Second, I must point out our awareness of the technological divide among students. The mission statement from Athabasca University declares that the university "is dedicated to the removal of barriers that restrict access to, and success in, university-level studies and to increasing equality of educational opportunity for adult learners worldwide" (Calendar 2006). The new digital technology often helps our professor and tutors to carry out this mission; however, we are also very sensitive to the fact that some of our students may not have regular access to computers, and online course materials for them may actually be a barrier. For this reason we maintain the flexibility of print based course materials so that nobody will be disadvantaged. More and more people in the Western World have access to computers, which are becoming as common as telephones, but we are not all there yet.

The period we are looking at in this paper begins in the calendar year of 1998 when most of our language and literature courses were primarily print based. The courses depended on conventional textbooks, supported by study guides, student manuals, work books and other printed material. In the 1980s we had been using e-mail with some students, and in the 1990s some students even sent us assignments as attached files. These students, however, were only about 60% of those enrolled in language and literature. The rest of the students still used the telephone and the postage system to communicate with professors. I must point out, however, that other faculties in the university were more advanced with the use of computer technology, especially the departments of business and the natural sciences.

In 1998 I was the first Athabasca literature professor in the literature program to use a dedicated website for my course in Shakespeare, English 324. I was able to get my students to use the online resources linked to my Shakespeare website to produce essays for the course. This was a breakthrough for my students and me. Gradually they became more confident with using online resources to do research work on Shakespeare. At the same time there was a growing body of material on Shakespeare in various sites around the world including one in Canada at the University of Victoria.¹ Later we added an online conferencing system to both this and a second course on Shakespeare, English 325. (All website URLs are listed and linked in the Works Cited).

The Theory Course: English 423

I used this successful experience with Shakespeare to quickly create a website for my course in contemporary literary theory, English 423. By 1999 I found that there was a growing body of material on theory scattered in various sites such as “The Voice of the Shuttle” at the University of California.

This course in literary theory was originally built exclusively on printed material. Now I constructed a website dedicated to this course that allowed the students to link to various sites on theory and to specific articles relevant to topics on the course. Also included in this site was an online discussion board for students in the course. With this

¹ Internet Shakespeare Editions, University of Victoria, Canada.

discussion system students were no longer isolated one from the other, but could share comments, questions, ideas, essay topics, and resources on literary theories. The goal was to shift to a more interactive learning environment. At first there was little change; however, by the year 2001 the majority of students (85%) had regular e-mail access to the course website, to the discussion board and to many external links. Students can still use the telephone to contact me or other professors or tutors, but this is happening less and less.

We are not dealing with a course that is completely delivered online in a virtual learning environment, VLE. We are dealing with a hybrid course which takes the best of the print media and adapts it to distance and online delivery in an asynchronous mode. Some of my colleagues call this the blended model (Anderson, 2004).

What changes in behaviour have we found in this course since 1999? Students began to do more online research to support course readings and to write essays than had been the case previously. Literary theory is a complex area for students to understand and to write about. Using online resources in the course students found they could do a number of things:

- Explore difficult concepts and ideas by finding definitions and articles on topics by some of the major experts in the field. Students could read the most recent explanations on complex concepts such as phenomenology, or postmodernism, or post-colonialism.

- Access other courses in theory which had online material and compare the lessons and explanations on the various theories and the controversies on theories to those in our course. One example is the theory course of Prof. John Lye of Brock University in Ontario, Canada. There are direct links to this course from our course home page.

- Explore and appreciate cultural and linguistic differences within and among theories. For example post-colonial theory in Australia is different from post-colonial theory in Canada. Another example: American texts on theory are inadequate when it comes to Marxist theories. We therefore refer students interested in exploring this issue in more depth to British or other European sites.

- Analyse the philosophical and historical background of some theories which often take us outside the limits of textbooks and literary curricula. Students found they could trace links among different areas of study such as literature and psychology, or literature and political thought. These are common activities in Comparative Literature.

- And finally, by using the online discussion board students could share this exploration with other students in the course: exchange URLs, suggest the most useful sites, and debate about ideas. To encourage this interest we have begun to post some of the better student essays for discussion.

The course website with its external links encourages students to supplement the material on the course. It allows them to change the course. And the professor must respond in interactions with students on the discussion board, with research and essay topics. This is similar to the experience of Prof. Laura Borràs Castanyer with her course in Comparative Literature at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Borràs 2005).

The very nature of the course changes from a focus on trying to understand the content; that is, literary theory, by memorizing definitions, terms and the names of critics, to one of online exploration to better understand that theory. Students soon find that learning definitions of terms does not help them to better understand theory. Through online research they see the many different approaches to a given theory such as postmodernism and so get a better grasp of the many ambiguities and disagreements in modern theory.

We can say then that the theory and the technology components complement one another in this course. The hybrid model works well here: textbooks and study guides combined with various online components. Students learn to use and balance both media to advance their studies but not to depend on only one or the other.

Another change in behaviour: Students no longer find that they need to speak to me on the telephone about course content as often as in the past. This has changed my behaviour: I must now initiate calls to students or send them e-mail. In marking student essays I can expect more and better research and a better quality of writing in general. I can give students feedback on my evaluation of their essays on the same day. They no longer need to wait a week or more for the postal service. Occasionally one or two better

student essays are posted on the course home page so that other students have models to follow in their own research and writing.

This digital technology often makes it easier to detect plagiarism. Since the essays are now on digital files they can easily be checked for unacknowledged source material. The fact that literature professors know and use online sources makes students more careful about their research practices.

Film and Literature: English 373

The second course I will discuss is devoted to Film and Literature: English 373 “Film and Literature”. This course is an introduction to the study of the relationships between literature and film. By its very nature this course involves the use of other media besides print. The other media include: film at the theatre, video, DVD, and television. Like my other courses we also use the telephone, e-mail and the online conference system.

This film and literature course has an elaborate website with many links to online resources on film history, film theory, film criticism and literature. It is appropriate that a course which introduces students to the study of the inter-relationships of two or more media and adaptation between media should have the students actually work with different media. And, of course, the goal is to help students develop critical skills in visual media as well as in literature.

Although the English 373 website is extensive, its links have been pre-selected by the course professor to guide the student to particular material. This process helps the student to develop critical skills of discrimination without becoming overwhelmed by the massive amount of material online, especially on media such as film. The course helps students develop critical visual skills that they transfer to their critical writing.

In the branch of psychology called learning theory one measure of learning is to observe changes in behaviour. What changes are taking place among these students? Students in traditional literature courses read books, take notes, discuss the books in classrooms and write essays. In this course students read books and view films. They learn to read and critically interpret films, compare different forms of film, and film techniques. They do research online and get practice with the visual media of the

computer screen. They learn these concepts in the context of literary studies. They learn to share their new ideas in the online conference board and in essays. The visual orientation and critical analysis in this course helps to make students visually literate.

The subject matter of the course, film and literature, is complemented by the media used in the course instruction. The hybrid model of using printed texts, the computer screen, video and DVD all coordinated in one course works well. The students trace the movement from print to film media, the problems of adaptation, by following this process of print to computer screen in a hands-on manner in their own course.

The changing behaviour is in part facilitated by the technology which is also changing. This revolution in technology is explored in the next course we will examine.

Literature and Hypertext: English 475

This course introduces students to the relationships between literature and hypertext which is a relatively new and changing phenomenon. One of the course authors is Carolyn Guertin who is the Canadian expert on literature and hypertext, much like Raine Koskimaa is in Scandinavian countries.

The course began in 2002 and many aspects of the Internet have changed since then as is indicated by the new edition of one of our core texts, George Landow's *Hypertext 2.0*, which has been reissued as *Hypertext 3.0*.

The ever-changing nature of digital technology makes it imperative to follow developments as they are reported and manifested online. If this course were developed today, the focus would be different in several ways. For example: the recent developments in mobile and miniature communication devices such as: digital phones which take pictures; compact music devices, I-pods, MP3 players, Pocket LOOX 720; compact DVD players; mobile multimedia players; blackberries and combinations of these devices are all so new that we have yet to determine their effects. How will this mobility affect our use of television and film? How will this mobility influence distance education? (Keegan) One of my colleagues at Athabasca University, Dr. Mohamed Ally, has begun to study these rapidly emerging mobile devices and their potential impact on course delivery. Now in addition to e-learning we have m-learning, mobile-learning,

which can literary take place anywhere. These are questions which we will explore in future revisions of this hypertext course.

English 475: Literature and Hypertext looks at three aspects of this digital relationship:

--Part 1. Hypertext as an aesthetic and an artistic medium, a new form of artistic expression that includes online literature. We read digital poetry, hypertext narratives, analyse animation and even games. We explore the narrative structure of our lives, of our stories and of the digital environment. Janet Murray's text is the core of this section.

--Part 2. The politics of hypertext examines the social, linguistic and political implications of hypertext as rhetoric.

--Part 3. Hypertext and literary research together with literary theory considers the implications of hypertext on the study of literature.

Let us focus on Part 2 of this course: the politics of hypertext. We begin with Canadian media theorist, Marshall McLuhan, who described technology as an "extension of man." This optimistic prosthetic view of technology is reflected in the title of this paper, "digital rib," digital technology as a handmaid, a consort to man or to woman (McLuhan 1995).

This technology is a product of civilization, but it also shapes society and how we think, what we think and how we live. And in education digital technology is changing the way we read, study, research and write about literature. This change is rapid in comparison to the adoption of earlier technologies. An example of this rapid change is my own experience with our literature courses and students at Athabasca University. When I went away on sabbatical in 1999 about 60% of our literature and language students had regular access to computers and to e-mail. The rest still used the telephone and the postage system to mail in assignments. When I returned in 2000 this student access had increased to 85% so I was struck by the difference immediately. Now about 98% of my students regularly use digital technology in our courses. Not only do students send in essays as attached files, but in some cases they also send essays with online references to demonstrate that they have done online research. In a few cases they have produced essays with hyperlink references to external sites. So I am reading hypertext student essays that require me to explore the external links. In 2006 one ambitious

student produced a wiki (a cross-referenced glossary with online links) for the whole course which had over 100 online pages of information.

These students are approaching their reading and writing in a different fashion than they did just 6 years ago. Their study of conventional literary texts is speeded up considerably as they can readily look up references, critical commentaries, historical background, theoretical statements, and other materials. They can also do more research in less time than in the past. This speed affects their understanding (and possible misunderstanding) of texts as they may not spend time contemplating what we read and study. In other words, they can easily access a wealth of information, but may not have the tools to sift through it effectively.

In the third part of the course: hypertext and literary research we spend some time critically examining these issues. What are the effects of rapidly changing technology on literary studies? What is the effect of speed? Canadian researchers, Alister Cumming and Gerri Sinclair (1994) looked at the implications for changes in the curricula as a result of computer use in schools. Will we continue to offer the same traditional curricula simply enhanced by digital technology, or will we see radical changes in conventional curricula as well as in teaching practices?

The Controversy

There is an on-going controversy over the actual effects of hypertext on the reading process. George Landow, Stuart Moulthrop, and other academics, maintain that hypertext helps readers form intertextual links with other texts. It helps them to break away from the more linear processes of reading, interpretation and research. Critics such as David Miall argue that this personal annotation and the creation of intertextual systems takes place with conventional reading and textual analysis. He maintains that we do not need hypertext for this interpretation of literary works. So what is the difference?

I do not have an answer to this controversy, but I do have an observation from my experience with the speed of the technology. The more experienced reader (student) can bring his/her knowledge to the interpretation of a text and create the intertextual links without the need for computer searches. The less experienced reader (younger student) is

less able to do this on his/her own. However, with the aid of online research this less well-read student is able to make these links more quickly, and learn about the literary context of a work. So the reading and annotation process is speeded up considerably, and that undergraduate student can now produce a critical analysis of a text that may be on a par with the work of a graduate student.

We have speeded up the process of reading and critical analysis, but does this also speed up the maturing process of the student? Does he/she now have more time to enjoy and think about the original literary text, or less time? My students try to deal with these questions.

A part of this controversy on the effects of hypertext on reading is the relation to literary theory, particularly reader-response theory. Stuart Moulthrop (1998) has argued that hypertext provides readers with the possibility to read texts, make their own links and create their own meanings, thus breaking down the distinction between author and reader. Hypertext reading gives new impetus to the discourse about reader-response theories. And here too my students try to deal with the questions raised, while at the same time they are using the very technology that they are investigating. They become more critically aware of their own behaviour and of mine. We are also collectively becoming aware of the darker side of cyberspace (Sardar 2000). Our students continue to ask questions.

Conclusion: The Study of Literature

Many professors of English steadfastly maintain that “The study of literature is the study of literature.” Is this really true? From my own experience in English Canadian schools I know that the study of literature is never just the study of literature. It has implications that go far beyond the classroom texts. The teaching of English literature is also one way of integrating the children of immigrants into mainstream Anglophone society. As such it has the social and political objectives of assimilation. Furthermore, we know from our reading of postcolonial literature and theory that the teaching and study of English literature all over the British Empire was also a way of indoctrinating the colonized about the superiority of English ways and so a means of imposing and maintaining order. And

now with the power of the American empire English has become the universal language on this globe. Given this history, anyone reading an English language work is never simply reading literature in the way that reading a work from a small country such as Italy or Greece can be a pass-time.

The three English courses examined here also challenge this notion of the purity of the study of literature. The new pervasive environments of literary theory, multimedia and hypertexts have each changed our reading and study of literature. I note that cyberspace is dominated by English. Nevertheless I am optimistic that these influences will make students better readers and better writers because they are obliged to be selective and to work with language on many levels.

The changing behaviour and the activities of students in three literature courses at Athabasca University demonstrate they are at ease with the inter-relations of different technologies. For many of them languages, symbols and visual scenes are part of the same continuum. Some become conscious of post-colonial theory and question the assumptions behind the study of English. We must continue to ask questions about the roles and effects of new technologies on the processes of learning.

All technology from the digging-stick to the computer is an extension of our own bodies as McLuhan envisioned it. Digital technology is changing so rapidly that we may lose the sense of our own bodies. One student wrote a research paper on the cyborgs among us, people who are combinations of living bodies and machines. How far do we reach and how fast? Literature courses, so often focused on language and meaning, are appropriate places to ask some of these questions.

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