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ABSTRACT

A HyperCard stack can be a primary computer-assisted instructional element in a freshman literature course and in an upper division "period" course. These stacks provide new alternatives for conventional classroom activities and add some possibilities not available in the traditional classroom setting. The stack for the freshman course contains course information, cards on literary genres, quizzes, and on-line journal assignments. The stack is also used to integrate the notion of literary theory into the course content, to provide additional activities for the poetry and drama units, and to assist students in writing essays. A proposed large-enrollment course in the 19th century novel would use computers as a teaching aid for out-of-class activities. The majority of class time would be devoted to class discussion and lecture, with group activities and/or in-class writing occupying only a small percentage of the time. The course could be largely paperless--with materials being turned in on disk--thus encouraging revision of ideas and integration of various ideas and texts. In many ways, the conceptual challenges in programming with HyperCard are not all that different from those involved in print-based composing, although primary differences involve allowing for variable paths through the text, and for reader interaction. Hypertextual applications encourage increased contact between students and promote the sense of community that classrooms so often lack. (RS)

CREATING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS USING HYPERTEXT

by

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Creating a Community of Learners Using Hypertext

In this paper I'll discuss the potential of using hypertext applications in two courses: a freshman literature course and an upper division "period" course. A primary focus of each course's computer-assisted instructional elements is a HyperCard stack. These stacks provide new alternatives for conventional classroom activities and add some possibilities not available in the traditional classroom setting.

In the freshman course the students first encounter the stack during the second course meeting. After a demonstration of the basic operations (turning on the machines, accessing the English Lab server and our class files), I introduce the HyperCard stack, hereafter reffered to as the E110 stack. This initial meeting has two goals: to expose the students to the basic browsing features of the stack and to act as a refresher course in literary terminology. Students first see the "course information" section of the stack, which contains copies of the syllabus, assignments, journal topics, and any other pertinent information to the running of the course. They then turn to the "Genres" section. I presume that most of the students have heard various terms in the literary vocabulary mentioned during their high school careers, but have probably shelved these concepts. Students first read the "Fiction Features" card which refreshes their minds with such terms as metaphor, plot, and point of view; they then complete the "Fiction Quiz." While an extremely simple exercise, the fiction quiz lets students have a senseof the interactive potential of HyperCard and reminds them of some conventional literary terms which may or may not serve as the starting point from which to read the two novels.

The E110 stack also contains the on-line journal assignments that the students will begin completing early in the semester. These assignments will

take a variety of forms throughout the course, but in the initial weeks they consist of student responses composed on MicroSoft Word and imported to the HyperCard stack. The entries generally have two parts: the first requires the students to consider a specific issue or topic related to the reading. The students will read the question from the "journal assignments" document and compose a response. They will then copy their response onto the designated card in the journals substack. The second part of each journal assignment asks students to consider three of their peers' responses and respond to those. (Obviously students must write the second part at a different time, usually at the end of a class period). Students again compose their comments on MicroSoft Word and import their responses to the appropriate portion of the stack. These journal entries subsequently serve as the basis for class discussion; to ensure their completion, I designate various students as discussion leaders for each class; they are responsible for reading and reviewing the particular journal assignment for each day. Failure to do so will harm both a student's class participation grade as well as the "written assignments" portion of the grade. In addition to facilitating class discussion, the journals also allow students to become familiar with composing on-line and performing simple stack composition tasks such as importing text into the stack. From the beginning of the course, then, students learn to integrate and connect texts using both conventional composition techniques and the more unfamiliar electronic rhetoric.

I also use the E110 stack as an opportunity to integrate the notion of literary theory to the course content. While in a freshman course I hardly expect students to engage in extensive readings in theory, I do believe they should have an orientation to the ways in which one can view a text. By surveying types of literary theory they gain a sense of how to look at a text at a level beyond the

plot and character summaries that most are used to performing. The theory portion of the HyperCard stack enables students to trace how various features--the author, the text, or the audience, for example--are treated from various critical perspectives by following these terms throughout the stack. At a later date they will also have the opportunity to use these various theoretical perspectives as the basis for their own interpretation of the course readings; initially, however, the stack serves only as a supplement to classroom discussion and to the assigned reading in Terry Eagleton's Literary Theory: An Introduction.

Since writing conventional essays is such an important component of the course, a portion of the stack is devoted to it. Students will find a number of composition aids in the "Writing about Literature" portion of the stack. Included is a sample essay complete with "hot text"[1] that allows students to study various components of a paper. Students also have available a number of suggested paper topics designed to reinforce the reading that they have completed in literary theory, as well as documents that treat the techniques used in drafting and revising papers. Students are also encouraged to explore their own writing and thinking processes by creating a paper that incorporates both their central argument as well as a "metacommentary" on its development. One such paper is required; others are at the student's discretion.

The poetry unit also has an activity that focuses on the features or components of the genre. Students will be asked to expand their composing abilities by creating a HyperCard-based research and analysis project on the poems we read. Exposure to Hypertext from the beginning of the course will aid

[1]Hot text is text designated by the stack constructor that allows a user to access either electronic footnotes or other portions of the stack that relate to the present material. In the model essay, hot text connections could be used to comment on the essay's structure, content, or style.

the students in developing their plans for their research stacks. Students have the option of writing print-based papers, importing them to HyperCard, and then creating a larger framework for them by using buttons and hot text links, or they may chose to compose purely in a hypertextual medium. These HyperCard documents will serve as the basis for the group presentations that will conclude the unit.

The use of the computers in the drama unit will be similar to that of the fiction section. Students will use the stack for reference material, a forum for discussion via their journals, and as a resource for their written work. At this point in the course I prefer that the students refine the skills they have acquired on-line without being required to add new ones. However, it is conceivable that some students may want to incorporate the graphics ability of HyperCard into their written work on the plays, and this option would be completely acceptable.

The final examination will also rely heavily on the computer. During the semester the class will repeatedly test the definitions of literature that they proposed on the first day. For the final I will ask for an electronically based document that reevaluates this question in light of the semester's work. The students may use anything they have written over the semester as a foundation for their arguments or they may decide to react against texts or discussions we have encountered. This project will be evaluated on the clarity and persuasiveness of the position it presents.

While the above activities would seem feasible in a small class with the proper equipment, we might ask what to do with the typical upper-division course that often has an enrollment three or four times that of the freshman composition course. I would like to propose an answer to this dilemma by examining a proposed class in the nineteenth-century novel, one not taught in a computerized classroom but which uses the computers as a teaching aid for

out-of-class activities. The description that follows of the course and its texts is a fairly traditional one.

> Studies in the Romantic Novel: Manners, Mystery, Marvels
>
> What do elegant manor houses, sinister castles, and fantastic adventure have in common? All serve as subjects for novelists of the Romantic age. During the semester we will examine some of the works of Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott, who are generally considered the two major novelists of the period, as well as some representative works of the popular gothic tradition. We will consider the following questions, among others: Did Austen document history or remain untouched by it? Why did Scott prefer to ground his works in history? Was the gothic novel merely sheer escapism for the masses?
>
> Texts: Austen: Emma, Persuasion, and Northanger Abbey
> Scott: The Heart of Midlothian
> Radcliffe: The Italian
> Mary Shelley: Frankenstein

The majority of the time would be devoted to class discussion and lecture, with group activities and/or in-class writing occupying only a small percentage of the time. The goals of this course include developing an understanding of the literature and the cultural background from which it evolved as well as developing an understanding of a particular author's work and concerns, recognizing dominant modes or motifs in the novels; analyzing how the works have been viewed since their publication; reading these works according to principles of modern critical theory; and considering how these works have or have not left a mark on subsequent literature.

In this course the schedule will allow two and one-half weeks for each of the six novels. This rigorous schedule will require a high level of focus and participation to achieve it. Students will need to spend time outside class reviewing and learning fundamental characteristics of nineteenth-century culture and history, as well as closely reading the primary texts in order to use class time to efficiently synthesize these areas. Additional requirements of the

course include a reading journal and one or two papers for a total of 15-20 pages of formal writing. Some sort of final is also planned.

The computer can aid in the completion of these tasks in a variety of ways. As in the freshman course, the server can provide easy access to logistical information including the syllabus, assignment-due dates and specifications, journal topics, and any schedule modifications that occur. The computers can also be used to provide students with a more interactive introduction or review to nineteenth-century culture and history than they might obtain from only wading through a number of secondary sources. After completing any required reserve reading the students may work with an interactive quiz that requires the student to apply concepts acquired in the reading. The students, by working with an interactive program, may also use the stack to read up on and then review principles of modern literary theory that have been applied to these texts by current scholars. Finally, the students can turn to the class files as a resource when writing their course papers. In the class files they will find a "writing assistance" section that, like the freshman-level course, presents a sample paper with annotations and a section on theoretically based topics for writing. The application will also contain a section on the use of secondary sources in writing papers about literature.

Obviously the use of the machines will change, since they are not available in the classroom. The first problem faced by the instructor in such a course is the introduction to the machines. This can be accomplished in one of two ways, either by using a single computer with overhead projection capabilities in the classroom or by scheduling one or two after-class orientations to the labs. Orientation should be simplified, because most upperclassmen will have used the computers at some prior point in their college careers. If not, however, it is a fairly simple matter to schedule two sessions,

one that first covers some of the basic computer operations and one that begins with the particular course files.

Using the computers in these ways should increase daily class efficiency. Given the larger numbers of students in the course, I also suggest working with a largely paperless course--that is, turning in reading journals and papers on disk. Such an idea seems particularly valuable if an instructor is encouraging revision of ideas and integration of various ideas and texts. The student paper can be viewed as a semester-length project rather than the common "one-shot" variety and instructor evaluation can come in the form of comments and suggestions for revision or new consideration rather than as the more common "nice try but better luck next time" version. Such a time commitment to student writing on the parts of both the student and instructor should encourage more carefully constructed texts; moreover, feedback from the instructor should be constructive commentary rather than a catalogue of faults.

Even if instructors are attracted by the aforementioned and illustrated stacks, the perceived difficulties in creating them would cause most to forget about using them in their own classes. "What do English teachers know about computer programming?" a friend asked recently. Those who doubt their ability should consider the following statements: "clarity, simplicity, and unity of language"; "clarity of structure"; "simple, natural, and elegant mechanisms." From a traditional rhetoric? Hardly. These comments are from a Handbook and Guide for Comparing and Selecting Computer Languages. Most instructors of English remain married to word-processing because it allows them to stay in an electronic version of an environment that they know. But programming languages are called just that for a reason. They "provide a conceptual framework for thinking about algorithms and a means of expressing these algorithms for machine execution" (Fogiel 1). If one substitutes "specific

processes" for the term "algorithms," it would seem that the definition for programming is not all that different from an expressive view of language. Furthermore, programmers also speak of the syntactic clarity of the language; languages that are syntactically clear provide fewer opportunities for careless programming errors, which increases the efficiency of not only the program execution but of its creation as well (Fogiel 1).

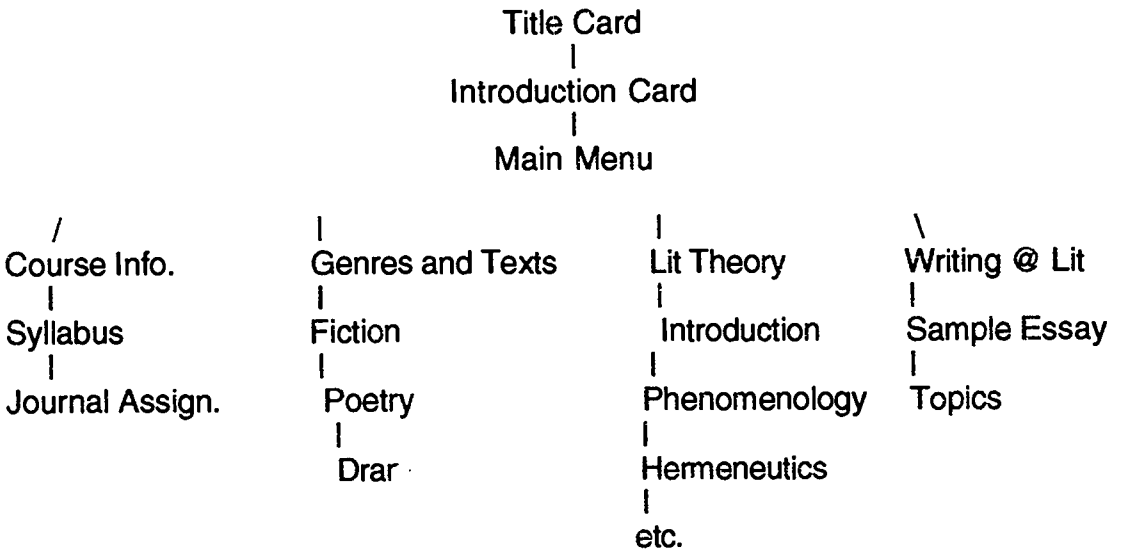
While no one would confuse a computer program with a term paper on Spenser, the elements involved in planning a stack look remarkably similar to those steps taken when preparing an essay. We will now go through the steps in planning the English 110 stack and examine these correspondences.

The first step involves defining the problem; for the 110 stack, I saw the problem as one of creating an interactive teaching tool that could help introductory students see connections between the elements of texts, theory, and writing, while giving them suggestions on how to perform each at a higher level. I considered how to specifically break down this general aim into discrete components and then devised the four areas of course information, genres and texts, literary theory, and writing about literature. The third step in this planning phase was to break each area into units that seemed self-contained yet recognizable on a single card. The course information and genre sections lent themselves to fairly obvious divisions, but the segments on literary theory and writing about literature required a little more contemplation, given the vast amount of material on each that was available.

Initial planning concluded, the project of creating a logical base structure is now at hand. If anything, this problem is even more important when creating a hypertext document, given the advantage of multiple tracks through the work. The developer must keep in mind the audience's level of computer knowledge. In this situation the author must find a happy medium between those users who

only felt confident moving from one card to another in sequence to those who are ready to create their own paths through the text. As in a printed essay, the author must ensure that transitions are complete and well-marked and that the reader knows where he or she has been in the text.

At this juncture my thoughts were as follows: I envisioned a structure similar to the one below.



I decided that the stack would be assembled so that the person who wanted sequence could move from course information to genre information to literary theory to writing about literature and that at the end of each sub-path the user would be directed back to the beginning of the next. For convenience, each card would have a link directly to the main menu as well as an automatic exit button.

The more adventurous user provided a substantial challenge. Not only would the sequential operation be a possibility; users could also read by moving from path to path, following a specific topic, for example. "Hot text," text that would serve as a transition to another card, would be used to achieve this. Users would find that clicking the mouse on any bold-faced text would transport

them to information about a specific concern. These users could also use the "find" function to search for particular information.

The actual connections between cards using hot text could not be made until the text had been imported into the stack. Thus, like any writer of a conventional essay, I had to decide what information for each topic would be placed in the stack. After compiling it, I would then determine which cards would be linked using the hot text. These transitions were of particular importance, since they had to make some sense to the user whose mind might need to make a jump between conventions of fiction and reader-response theory, for example. I as author had to keep in mind the level of sophistication of the audience so as not to bombard them with more connections between information than they could assimilate. HyperCard is, after all, a tool for organizing information for consumption instead of merely accessing it and presenting it in an unmediated form (Beekman xx).

In many ways then, the conceptual challenges of programming with HyperCard are not all that different from those involved in print-based composing. One primary difference, discussed above, is allowing for the variable paths through the text. Another difference concerns the aspect of interaction that allows a reader to construct a portion of the stack not simply by blazing a new trail but by creating new portions of the stack or altering existing ones. It is in this area that instructors have the most decisions to make when creating stacks. Are their stacks to resemble electronic reading reserve lists with interaction limited to some choice in reading materials or will they serve as places where students may, for example, add information they have acquired through a research project or comment on existing texts in the stacks? Or will students take an "uncharted" stack and create their own readings and

commentaries within it? Such a stack could be used for many purposes, as a prelude to a student-directed class discussion or even perhaps as an exam.

These latter options could be instituted regardless of whether a course were taught in a computerized classroom or if students only had access to computers through university computing centers. Such supplements could be of particular value as a measure of how much students had actually learned in a large lecture-survey course. Instead of conducting only the often fruitless "small group" discussion of thirty or thirty-five people, the students could alternate between these sessions and an interactive quiz. The quiz results could even be used as the basis for each small group or as a review of the preceding week's reading. In any case, the hypertextual applications encourage increased contact between students and promote the sense of community that our classrooms so often seem to lack.

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