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Digital Texts and the New Literacies

When the literature anthologies did not arrive, Allen Webb turned to the Internet, where he found a wealth of classic and contemporary e-texts. Using these online resources opened up possibilities for new ways of teaching and learning traditional skills of close reading and critical analysis. Students created blogs of poems and commentary, compared versions of *The Odyssey* and a controversial news story, and manipulated the language and structure of texts to question the cultural and historical contexts of the work.

As literature goes from print to digital formats, rich possibilities are opening up to deepen and extend teaching and learning. Fundamental to the new literacies will be students' careful reading and critical engagement with online, digitized texts. Jerome McGann, in his study *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web*, argues that Western civilizations' cultural archive is moving onto the Internet. Google reported that the company plans to digitize seven million titles over a six-year period from the University of Michigan library, and a "digitize the complete library" arrangement is also the current plan at Stanford and Oxford. Currently there are hundreds of extensive online literary text archives where valuable and teachable works can be found. All of these texts are digitized; many include hyperlinked glossing and rich background information. What does this sea change in the availability and delivery of literary texts make possible for English teachers and students?

I recently decided to explore this question with the introductory literature course I was teaching. A former high school teacher, I also work with secondary teachers, so exploring the possibilities of online literary texts would be important for both the literature students and the secondary teachers I work with. The decision was reinforced when there was a mix-up at the bookstore with anthology editions, and I was forced to go to the Web to look for reading material. What I found was an unbelievable depth and range of digitized literary texts. I was able to find on the Internet most of the poems,

plays, and short stories that were in the anthology, and there was much, much more. I decided to cancel the order for the textbook and, instead, experiment with teaching the entire class out of the digital archives, literature sources, and online texts found on the Web.

In this introductory literature class, I was less concerned about specific authors, genres, or historical periods and more focused on helping students read carefully and closely and enjoy the works. During our first class meeting, I showed students how to navigate sites and provided them with Web addresses of the Academy of American Poets, Poetry Archives, Bartleby.com, Project Gutenberg, American Verse Project, Library of Congress Poetry Resources, University of Toronto Representative Poetry Online, Contemporary Poets, Modern British and Irish Poetry, Poetry Magazine, The Poetry House, Poetry Archive, and the University of Virginia Modern English Collection—all Web sites with extensive, freely available digital poetry, from classic to contemporary. Our reading for the first three weeks of class entailed students' scanning these archives, identifying poetry that appealed to them, and writing about those poems and the poets' use of language and imagery. While many students sought out famous writers, including Shakespeare, Keats, Wordsworth, Dickinson, Frost, and Hughes, they also read poetry by outstanding contemporary writers that I was unfamiliar with, including Adrian Henri, Samuel Menashe, Polly Peters, Gillian Clark, Alison Groggon, and many more. Sites featured not only the poetic texts but

also recordings of poems read aloud, often by the poet. Poetry Archive (<http://www.poetryarchive.org>), for example, describes itself as “the world’s premier online collection of recordings of poets reading their work.”

Immersed in a World of Poetry

Reading poetry from this diverse group of online archives meant that students were immersed in a world of poetry in a way that they simply could not be with a traditional textbook or anthology. So many of the sites are *alive*, connected to living poets and to poetry lovers. For instance, the Academy of American Poets features a “National Poetry Map” where students can search for poetry events near them. This site also advertises poetry book clubs; accepts manuscripts of contemporary poets; offers poetry awards; provides free podcasts; offers a free newsletter; and provides reading recommendations, lesson plans, and resources for teachers. Other sites let students explore poetry in other ways not possible in an anthology. The American Verse Project assembles volumes of American poetry published before 1920 and facilitates word and phrase searches throughout the archive. The Poetry Foundation site includes searches by category, occasion, title, first line, “most popular,” and “especially for children.” This site includes articles, audiovisual materials, links to poetry resources on the Web, subscriptions to poetry magazines, letters to the site, and so forth.

Using these online resources for the teaching of poetry brought students into the world of professional poets, and lovers and scholars of poetry, so that the writing of a poem or writing about poetry seemed like participation in an active community. Poetry was not something frozen in a book. The freedom to move from site to site, richly exploring the resources available, was empowering. As students created links to their favorite poems and published these on their blog sites, they were creating anthologies, inviting other students in the class to read their favorite poems and comment.

My first fear about reading poetry online had been that students wouldn’t read carefully the language they viewed on a screen. I know that I prefer to have paper in front of me and that I invariably write in my book, underlining and scribbling notes on words and lines. I think that people “read” the

USING BLOGS

All of the students in my class maintain their own blog at Blogger.com. These blogs are free, amazingly easy to set up, and make students publishers and Web contributors. All of our blogs are linked together and allow commenting. If teachers desire, the blogs can be kept “private” with only approved people allowed to read them. For more on using blogs with your students, see Will Richardson’s *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms*.

Internet in the same way they watch television commercials, letting many things go by without concentration. I talked with students about the close reading I wanted them to engage in. In class we used a data projector and magnified the poetry so that the whole class could read and discuss the poems effectively. With the poem projected on a screen, I focused on particular words and phrases, modeling engaged, close reading. While any of the poems found online could be printed out on paper, that didn’t seem necessary.

One day I projected an online version of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in large font and we discussed the work. After reading the poem aloud, students identified interesting images, wrote about them, and then shared their thoughts. The images we examined took us deeper into the poem’s reflection on the message of the urn; the tension between organic life that changes, grows old, and dies; and the eternal beauty of art that the urn (and Keats, too, perhaps) championed. We had what might have been a typical discussion about this rich and wonderful work—though our text was only on the screen.

Next I directed the students, who were stationed at computers, to copy the poem from the Web page and paste it into a Microsoft Word document. We then tried an activity that I had read about the night before on the fascinating Web site of Keats scholar Jeffrey C. Robinson, professor of English at the University of Colorado at Boulder. On a page hosted at the Romantic Circles Web site (<http://www.rc.umd.edu>, “devoted to the study of Romantic-period literature and culture”), Robinson describes his teaching experiments with “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” He has students do what he

calls “deform” the poem, rewriting it into a new work. “When I deform a poem, I bring to it a highly selective consciousness and intervene materially in its existence, just as Keats does in encountering the Grecian Urn,” Robinson states (par. 5). His student Andrew describes the process:

I slowly crushed the piece into different shapes. I broke it down and built it up again. I RETURN, RETURN, DELETE, DELETE, DELETED. UP and down the words skipped, lines jumping and leaping all over the computer screen trampoline. (par. 7)

When I tried Robinson’s experiment in my class, I was surprised by the ease with which my students took to the activity. For the first time, this talkative class worked in silence. The only student comment came fifteen or twenty minutes into their activity when Anthony—a serious student and the starting defensive end for our football team—asked, “Can we add words?” Eventually I asked if anyone wanted to share his or her version of the poem. One student read her version aloud. Another had already published his version to his blog, so we viewed that on the data projector. Meghan, a first-semester freshman whose first college class was my 8 a.m. introductory literature course, had published a version of the poem on her blog and shared it with the class. She told us that the poem was becoming a piece about spousal abuse, titled, “Bound by Marriage, Embraced by Abuse.”

Bride of quietness,
child of silence,
Those unheard are sweeter,
more endeared.
Though canst not grieve,
though thou hast not thy bliss
Play on, fair youth,
thy song cannot fade.
Forever wilt thou love.
Never canst thou leave!
More happy love!
(Forever breathing sorrow)
More happy, happy love!
(Forever panting, burning)
Sacrifice thy peace
Or silent be for evermore
And ne’er return.
Fair attitude trodden
By thy marble man

And by eternity.
In midst of silent woe
Truth doth tease you
But wasted beauty is all you know.

In *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies*, Rob Pope talks about the way his students rewrite works of great literature to investigate not only language but also cultural and historical contexts. Meghan’s version of Keats, while playful and clearly a different work than its source, also raises questions about the gendered language of Keats’s poem and the nature of his imagination of Greek romantic relationships. The ease and potential for textual intervention is greatly increased by the availability of digitized texts. This ability to take the words of any work of literature and put them into a word processor creates powerful close-reading possibilities that go beyond scribbling in the margins. The language of literature becomes something that students manipulate for meaning, and they thus come to see literature as actively created, interpreted, and reinterpreted.

Reading *The Odyssey* in Multiple Translations

Reading *The Odyssey*, one of the foundational works of Western literature, offered my students opportunities for close reading and creative writing. Since the Renaissance, *The Odyssey* has been translated into English by some of our language’s most-famous poets and scholars. Each translation reflects the literary and cultural sensibilities of the translator and the period in which he or she was working.

Online, I found sixteen different English translations of *The Odyssey* available in different digital archives, including Chapman’s 1616 translation, the first in English and celebrated by Keats in his famous sonnet (at Bartleby.com), Alexander Pope’s from 1725 (Project Gutenberg), William Cowper’s from 1791 (Bibliomania), Samuel Butcher and Andrew Lang’s from 1879 (RobotWisdom.com), Samuel Butler’s from 1900 (MIT Internet Classics Archive), and a host of recent translations viewable at Amazon.com under “search inside this book.” I even came across an Ancient Greek version with word-by-word transliteration into English at the Tufts University Perseus Archive. (In finding some of these sites I was helped by Jorn Barger’s list of *The Odyssey* translations,

<http://www.robotwisdom.com/jaj/homer/odyssey.html>.) I posted links to all of these translations on my Web site, and in class we examined several translations of the first thirty lines of the poem. (My Web site is at <http://www.allenwebb.net>; for this assignment, see English 1100.)

The students not only identified substantial differences in the format and style of the translations, but when they looked closely at the word choice and

Then, by looking closely at different translations, they were to “interpolate” word-by-word meaning and create a “translated” version of the lines. They could choose to make their version as contemporary as they liked and to use poetry or prose.

phrasing, they could also see that the translations powerfully affected the reader’s understanding of characters and events. Although at first the students were drawn to the easier, more modern prose translations, I was astonished that as we began to compare those translations with some of the older, denser, and poetic translations, the students kept saying that the older versions were “better” and that some of

the newer translations seemed “lazy” (their word, not mine). Indeed, Alexander Pope’s 1725 translation of *The Odyssey* emerged as the class favorite.

The students’ first paper assignment on *The Odyssey* was to carefully examine two or three of these versions to see how translation shaped the meaning of the work. The following are quotations from three student papers:

Anyone trying to understand the poem [should] read more than one version to see the many layers in the original and expand the imagination to see what each line could have meant.—Rachel

Subtle changes in word choice can produce different meanings, connotations, or a completely separate view of central characters . . . [Samuel] Butler’s use of the word “ingenious” brings to mind thoughts of a quick-witted, even a cunning individual; one who never lacks a plan to get himself out of trouble. By describing Odysseus as being well known for “wisdom’s various arts,” [Alexander] Pope establishes a hero who is skilled and clever in multiple ways, rather than just quick on his feet.—Meghan

Changes in the ideas and language of every society that has been exposed to the epic story have in turn altered the poem itself. These new versions

may sound nothing like Homer’s would have in the fields and villages of Ancient Greece, but the changes ensure that this work of art has lived on as long as it has and will undoubtedly live far into the future.—Andrew

Looking at different translations helped the students see that *The Odyssey*, like any work of literature, involved many different choices about the words and phrasing. Seeing many versions of the work whetted student interest in the writing process. Now I wanted them—even though they knew no Ancient Greek—to do their own translation. This was an idea suggested to me by Kim Bell, working with ninth graders at the Lake Forest Academy before I had heard of “textual intervention.” I asked students to choose a passage of *The Odyssey* that they found interesting either for the images or events described and study several different English translations of these lines. (They also had the original Greek available to them at the Perseus Archive.) Then, by looking closely at different translations, they were to “interpolate” word-by-word meaning and create a “translated” version of the lines. They could choose to make their version as contemporary as they liked and to use poetry or prose. Ashley wrote, “Once you get going with this it isn’t so difficult anymore. It’s actually (dare I say it???) kind of, a little, teeny, tiny bit fun to do. Doing this definitely gives a significantly larger grasp of the literal story.” I certainly enjoyed reading their translations. The following is a sample in contemporary prose written by Alicia:

When the beautiful red morning sun started to shine through the bedroom window, Telemachus woke up, showered and got dressed. He put his sandals on his feet, brushed his teeth and put his sword over his shoulder before leaving the house looking handsome as ever. Then, he sent an announcement around to call everyone of the town together for a meeting. Telemachus does not travel alone, so he took his two cute little dogs with him to meet at the gathering place. As he walked by the people of the town to get to his seat, the most prestigious men even made space for him to pass through. Telemachus had a classy presence to him as he took over his father’s chair.

Alicia is clearly making *The Odyssey* her own. Having seen how translators modify the source text, she

is comfortable making changes to convey the meaning as she understands it. I like the way her version sounds like contemporary speech, and I love the tooth-brushing! At the end of the semester several students identified this creative-translation writing as their favorite assignment.

Additional Possibilities from Online Archives

Using online digital archives makes possible a range of other teaching and learning possibilities that are not available with traditional textbooks. After reading a Greek or Shakespearean play, a Wordsworth poem or a Twain novel as a class, students can individually or in literature circles find and read from an archive another play, poem, or novel by the same author or of the same type. Students can create literature anthologies or textbooks that can be annotated with specific information about authors, movements, and traditions. This activity can lead to reflection on how anthologies are created in the first place. There are many digital archives that provide online glossaries and extensive notations. Many literary works were originally illustrated, and students can study these original illustrations and consider the relationship of illustrations and text. Examples can be found at the William Blake or Gabriel Rossetti Archives. Original illustrations for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are available at the University of Virginia Electronic Text Center (<http://extext.lib.virginia.edu>).

Students can cut and paste from electronic texts and create commentary, or hypertext, with notes on specific words, characters, or ideas. They can make comments in different colors, perhaps using Microsoft Word's "track changes," to indicate thoughts of characters, add to descriptions of settings, and so on. My students have engaged in a wide variety of these hypertextual interventions, experimentally linking and rewriting literary works, including writing by Federico García Lorca, William Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Students can add pictures to create illustrated works, which is effective with visually strong pieces such as *The Odyssey*. For this, consider the site Literary Locales (<http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/english/places.htm>), an archive of "picture links to places that figure in the

lives and writings of famous authors." Students can also rearrange texts to tell a different story. They could put *The Odyssey* or some other work in chronological order, or jumble the order of a work to make its reading more interesting, or change genres to see what happens when changing prose to poetry or vice versa. They can add to the text or rewrite passages to create specific effects—change a character description to make it less racist, or to update it, or to make it humorous. All of these activities create new texts that call for reflection and analysis.

These activities are not only possible with digitized texts but they are also appropriate to the medium. Indeed, in *Radiant Textuality*, McGann argues that the digitizing of literary works is never just a recopying but always a translation, creating new interpretations and additional layers of meaning.

Lest you think that my students only work with online versions of traditional literary works, our next unit focused on reading digital texts about war, particularly the war in Iraq. We began by reading some classic war poetry and literature—all online—including Mark Twain's "The War Prayer," Wilfred Owen's often-anthologized "Dulce et Decorum Est," and Bertolt Brecht's "War Has Been Given a Bad Name." Soon we were immersed in the poetry of contemporary American soldiers and their families, found in digital form on sites such as the League of American Poets, AuthorsDen, and Poets Against War. Because much of this poetry was contemporary, written in the last few weeks or months and dealing with vital issues and experiences relevant to a national crisis, this portion of the class was especially meaningful to students. It would not be possible to find this kind of material in even the most recent literature textbook or anthology. From the poetry we turned to soldiers' blogs. The students found these sites and shared them with the rest of the class. Some included photographs and short video. During class discussion, I learned that students had many connections to American troops stationed in Iraq. Two young women had boyfriends there, one young man had a brother, and several students had friends there.

Perhaps the most powerful discussion took place when Andrew drew our attention to the Al Jazeera news service Web site in English (<http://english.aljazeera.net>). Just as with the assignment

to read different translations of *The Odyssey*, we compared three different versions of the same news story. Treating the stories as digital texts, the students examined the language of these versions, and we were astounded by the dramatic differences in perspective and word choice.

The day we were comparing sites, a lead news item was a horrific story about the assault, rape, and murder of an Iraqi girl, her parents, and her five-year-old sister by a group of American soldiers. This was reported by Al Jazeera (10/16/06), the BBC (10/19/06), and CNN (10/18/06). I asked students what differences they could find in the versions of the events. Looking at the details of the language, one student noticed that the CNN article stated that there was “confusion about the girl’s age”: “A Justice Department affidavit in the case against Green says investigators estimated her age at about 25, while the U.S. military said she was 20.” However, the Al Jazeera report provided a photograph of the girl’s identity card showing her age as fourteen. “How does the different information about the girl’s age affect our sense of the crime?” this student asked. Another student noticed that information in the BBC report provided “explanation” for the soldiers’ rape and murder and “blam[ed] it on the Iraqis” by mentioning that the soldiers were suffering “intense combat stress . . . left demoralized and emotionally drained by frequent insurgent attacks.” The student noticed that even though eleven American soldiers took part in or were present at the event, the CNN report seemed to blame just one soldier with “an anti-social personality disorder.” On the other hand, the Al Jazeera site quoted the Association of Muslim Scholars, “an influential Sunni organization in Iraq,” as issuing “a strong condemnation over the rape of the Iraqi girl and the brutal killing of her family by U.S. troops,” referring to the Americans as “invaders,” and claiming that the rape and killing “show the truth of the ugly American face and shows that their claims of supporting humanity and liberation are false.”

Looking at the Internet for source reading makes possible the inclusion of texts, information, and news sources not usually available to students or in the classroom. In this case the class was able to study information from an Arabic news source and point of view and, by comparing it to American and British sources, raise basic and important questions about the information they customarily receive through more-traditional media. Our class discussed potential bias on all sides, why Al Jazeera might want to quote the Association of Muslim Scholars, and why such a quote and words for the Americans such as “invaders” might not be found in the CNN and BBC reports. But it was the inclusion of the Al Jazeera reporting, made possible by using the Internet, that most prodded students to think critically about the language and detail of media coverage of the war and how US actions might appear to people around the world.

Teaching the “new literacies” involves not only learning about and taking advantage of new materials, such as online poetry sites, digital archives, and scholarly electronic resources, but also helping students learn to think carefully and critically about what they read, mass media reports as well as literature. In this sense, teaching digital texts as part of the new literacies offers us not so much a revolution as an evolution. We should be applying what we know about good English teaching, about close reading and cultural studies, to these new materials and, at the same time, as we extend the texts under consideration, evolving our methods and approaches.

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