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"Expressive Technology": Multimedia Projects in Honors Courses

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—National Collegiate Honors Council Mission Statement

". . . we often find ourselves casting about for effective ways to educate students for a world with which we, ourselves, are unfamiliar—and about which we remain uncertain." (3-4)

—Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe

"How might one build a creative arts component . . . into a course not otherwise involved with the creative arts?" was one of the questions Rusty Rushton posed in his Call for Papers for the volume titled "Honors and the Creative Arts." His question caught my attention. The NCHC's Mission Statement calls upon us as teachers of Honors courses "to enhance opportunities (academic, cultural, and social) responsive to educational needs of highly able and/or exceptionally motivated undergraduate students." On the other hand, however, we may feel, as Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe clearly do, that "we often find ourselves casting about for effective ways to educate students for a world with which we, ourselves, are unfamiliar—and about which we remain uncertain" (3-4). A significant element of that world is, of course, technology.

As a faculty member in the English Department at Gainesville College, a two-year, liberal arts college, I teach, among other things, a sophomore Honors World Literature course. I taught it during the fall of 2000 and again in the fall of 2001. Prior to the beginning of Fall Semester 2000, I struggled with what type of project to include in this new course. I wanted a project that would engage and challenge my students, as well as tap into their creativity. I finally decided that, instead of traditional research papers, students would create websites that incorporate hypertext and hypermedia. These two terms have been in general use for a number of years but still bear defining. In his book *Hypertext 2.0*, George P. Landow uses the term

hypertext to denote "text composed of blocks of text . . . and the electronic links that join them" and the term *hypermedia* as the extension of "the notion of the text in hypertext by the inclusion of visual information, sound, animation, and other forms of data" (3). Thus, hypermedia (or multimedia) incorporates elements found in the creative arts, such as words, images, and sound.

In this essay, I will discuss the creative art of multimedia work and the pedagogy concerned with it, focusing in particular on the web projects my students created. I must say at the outset that I am neither an educational theorist nor a creative artist. My purposes here are merely to explore issues concerning the relationship between technology, creative arts, and pedagogy. In doing so, I have relied heavily on the insights and expertise of theorists involved in art, pedagogy, technology, and new media. My ultimate goal, however, is to open discussions about how these four areas can come together to benefit students in Honors courses.

Art and Technology in Education

It is perhaps best to begin with the issue of the relationship between art and technology in education. In her article "Bridge To, Bridge From: The Arts, Technology, and Education," Carol Gigliotti suggests that the metaphor of education as the bridge between art and technology "locate[s] technology on one side of the span, the arts on the other," and that each becomes the "antithesis of the other" (89). She points out that the "implied purpose of the bridge . . . is to provide a ground upon which ideas from each of these areas of endeavor may travel to the other" (89). She goes on to argue that "[o]ne may just as well have envisioned art as the bridge between education and technology, or technology as the bridge between art and education" (89). The latter metaphor of technology as the "bridge" joining art and education places technology as the central connection for enriching both the arts and education and in turn enriching students. For Gigliotti, "[t]he partnerships constructed between the arts and interactive computer technologies are extremely important ones to the forming and defining of the future of education" (92). In a similar, but perhaps broader, argument, Charles Traub and Jonathan Lipkin suggest that "The computer has created profound new ways of interacting, thinking, and doing. The digital computer and its accompanying methodologies recreate modes of working which stress relationships between bodies of knowledge and human minds" (25). They go on to point out that "[h]uman expression is nondisciplinary by nature. Disciplines exist only because of boundaries [that] are artificially imposed by the academy" (25).

More specifically, Richard A. Lanham discusses the merging of and common ground between creative arts and technology. Lanham notes that "[b]ecause word, image, and sound are expressed in a common digital code, the arts take on a new and radical convertibility that threatens both their present compartmentalization and its academic departmental embodiment" (xi). He proposes that "[d]igitization gives [the arts] a new common ground, a quasi-mathematical equivalency that recalls the great Platonic dream for the unity of all knowledge" (11). In addition, he suggests, "[B]ecause all the arts face the same technological pressures, they are going to find,

create, new relationships through that technology, through their new digital equivalences" (13). Lanham concludes: "In the digital light of these technologies, the disciplinary boundaries that currently govern academic study of the arts dissolve before our eyes. . . . It is not only the distinction between the creator and the critic that dissolves, but the walls between painting and music and sculpture, architecture, and literature" (13).

To describe computer technology, Lanham also uses the phrases "expressive technology" and "expressive medium," referring to the capabilities of the personal computer (ix). Among these capabilities is the creation of multimedia. Jason Ohler extends Lanham's argument by pointing out that "the multimedia environment of the Web . . . requires students to think and communicate as designers and artists" (16). For Ohler, the "age of art has arrived, leaving behind the text-centric world that has guided us for so long" (16). He argues that the "language of art has become the next literacy—or the fourth R," and that "we need to move quickly to prepare students to be literate in the world that they are inheriting and rapidly shaping" (16). In summary, he notes, "The other three Rs are literacies that facilitate learning and expression in content areas. In a multimedia world, this definition of literacy exactly captures the role of art" (19).

I would now like to consider ways in which multimedia work shares common ground with the creative arts. On a very basic level, as Lanham notes, *pixels* are "'picture elements,' the dots that electronically paint the letters onto the computer screen" (3). Thus, as Lanham points out, "[t]extual surface is now a malleable and self-conscious one," and "[a]ll kinds of production decisions have now become authorial ones" (5). In talking about "taking literacy into the electronic era," Gunter Kress discusses "the 'turn to the visual'" ("Visual and Verbal Modes" 56). He points out that when using computer technology "the visual is there, and the possibilities even of producing written text focus on visual aspects—font-types and size, layout, visuals to accompany the linguistic text" (56). In addition, Kress suggests that the "'look of the page' is now not a matter only of a specialized group of producers of texts; it is a general concern, and the means for page design are readily there" (56). Kress's second point is that "contemporary technologies of page or text production make it easy to combine different modes of representation—image can be combined with language, sound can be added to image, movement of image is possible" (56). He goes on to say, "[O]ne person now has to understand the semiotic potentials of each mode—sound, visual, speech—and orchestrate them to accord with his or her *design*" (56).

Landow makes a further connection between creative arts and technology. He equates hypertext/hypermedia/multimedia with the art form of collage. He uses the on-line *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) definition of collage: "an abstract form of art in which photographs, pieces of paper, newspaper cuttings, string, etc., are placed in juxtaposition and glued to the pictorial surface" ("Collage-Writing" 156). He emphasizes that "[h]ypertext, which permits authors to use traditional methods, also permits them to create . . . effects simply by connecting texts with links. Hypertext . . . appears as textual collage—'textual' referring to alpha-numeric information—but more sophisticated forms of this medium produce visual collage as well" (160). The

more sophisticated forms would be multimedia, which combine text, image, and sound. Landow's assertion is that "collage clearly exists in this new writerly medium almost certainly because it so fundamentally combines the visual and the verbal" (166). Landow acknowledges, however, that "[h]ypertext writing . . . does not coincide fully with either montage or collage" (170). He "[draws] upon them chiefly . . . to [help us] . . . understand this new kind of hypertext writing as a mode that both emphasizes and bridges gaps, and that thereby inevitably becomes an art of assemblage. . . . It is a text in which new kinds of connections have become possible" (170).

Along similar lines, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin discuss the concept of remediation and the new media. They use the term *remediation* to "express the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another" (59). Their focus is on the visual technologies (computer graphics and the World Wide Web). They "argue that these new media are doing exactly what their predecessors have done: presenting themselves as refashioned and improved versions of other media. Digital visual media can be understood through the ways in which they honor, rival, and revise linear-perspective painting, photography, film, television, and print" (14-15). Bolter and Grusin propose that "[w]hat is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media" (14-15). In their discussion, Bolter and Grusin define digital art as "static graphic images made with pixels rather than oils or watercolors. . . . Such images are created with the aid of two- and three-dimensional graphics programs, and they may remediate all sorts of traditional visual art, from oil-based painting to pen-and-ink-illustrations, photographs, and collage and photomontage" (133). They note that digital art "may be an image that was generated entirely in the digital domain, or it may contain elements from other media that have been scanned in and modified" (133). Bolter and Grusin define *medium* as "that which remediates. It is that which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them" (97). The discussions of Ohler, Kress, Bolter, and Grusin reinforce Lanham's description of the computer as an "expressive medium," one that can be used to incorporate other media as well as aspects of the creative arts: text, sound, and image.

From Theory to Pedagogy

I would like to turn now from theory to pedagogy. The project that my Honors students were assigned was to create fairly simple web sites consisting of nine web pages per site. Their sites were constructed with conventions of a traditional research paper plus the new conventions of multimedia. The anchor page served the same function as an introduction in a research paper. In their discussion on the anchor page, students had to outline the critical issue that they would explore and provide a context for their argument. In addition, they had to create labeled navigation links to the rest of the site pages. These navigation links functioned as a table of contents. Like the body of a research paper, six of the nine pages were devoted to expanding and exploring aspects of their topic with detailed discussions. Unlike a print paper,

however, the body of the web site contained keyword links to relevant pages and discussions within the site and to appropriate external sites on the World Wide Web. Thus, the discussions became hypertext. In addition, students were required to provide a conclusion page that summarized the main points of their argument. Since the project was a research project, students also had to include at least four secondary sources and provide a "works cited" page. In addition, elements of multimedia were also required for the project. Students had to include at least one image per page, and they had the option of adding music, which several of them chose to include.

Students used Microsoft's FrontPage, a web-authoring software. Because time was needed to introduce students to the software, we devoted about a third of the semester to working on the project. To construct and create the project, students had to learn a variety of skills such as importing backgrounds and images, creating navigation buttons, making tables, setting up hyperlinks, and adding music. They also had to make creative and aesthetic decisions: selecting colors and textures for the background, deciding on the color, size, and style of the font, finding images that complemented their discussions, arranging blocks of text and images on the pages, and incorporating appropriate music.

Thus through the use of "expressive technology," each student became what Traub and Lipkin call a "creative interlocutor," a "designer who facilitates the exchange of ideas and information . . . the curator, editor, and collector, then the maker, weaver, welder, builder, and distributor" ("Creative Interlocutor" 25). Traub and Lipkin argue that, "[r]ather than erect boundaries between areas of thought, the computer. . . has the ability to remove them and allow the return of liberal arts to their traditional meaning, freeing us to think" (33). For Traub and Lipkin, the "new creative individual" is "distinguished by [his or her] ability to negotiate the disparate fields of human knowledge, bringing them together in previously unimagined ways, and relating them for others to use meaningfully" (34). This concept of the "new creative individual" was what I hoped for by assigning multimedia projects.

In both Honors World Literature courses, the majority of students were enthusiastic from the beginning about the projects. Doing a multimedia project rather than a traditional research paper, of course, piqued their interest. There were, however, some students in both courses who expressed reservation—not specifically about the projects, but about the technology they would need to learn in order to create the projects. Knowing that I would have students who had little or no experience with creating or designing web sites, I set aside class time for students to learn FrontPage and time for class discussions about the basic conventions of web page design. I was very fortunate to have assistance from Jo McClendon, the Outreach Services Librarian at Gainesville College, who is pursuing her doctoral degree in instructional technology. Jo provided technical assistance and taught the students how to use the software. She and I were both available to help students during and (individually) outside class. Once the hesitant students realized that I was not going to abandon them to figure out for themselves the technical aspects of the project, they were reassured. Teaching the technology that the students would need did require a considerable amount of class time, but as Gigliotti's metaphor of technology as a bridge suggests, technology can form the connection between the

creative arts and academic disciplines as it did with these multimedia projects, and that bridge was worth building. Once students learned the technical skills needed for the project, they could then begin to "bridge" the creative arts and academic content.

The Projects

Before discussing the projects, I want to return to Traub and Lipkin's "creative interlocutor" as a "designer who facilitates the exchange of ideas and information . . . the curator, editor, and collector, then the maker, weaver, welder, builder, and distributor" (25). As the students worked on their projects, they assumed these various roles while at the same time facilitating ideas and information. In creating their projects, students truly became designers. They collected images and music, which were then incorporated along with their texts onto their pages. As designers, students had to make choices of appropriate images that illustrated and enhanced their discussions. These artistic choices included not only the images, but also the aesthetic placement of the images on the pages. Other design choices had to be made. Students had to decide on background, font size, and banner headings for each of their pages. Among the design conventions we discussed was the need for site unity (consistent backgrounds, font size, navigation tools). As designers, students had to be aware of the visual components of their projects in addition to the content. At the end of the semester, students presented their projects to the class, after which they were made accessible for others, such as family and friends, to view. Thus, students became the distributors of information and ideas to a wider audience than just their classmates.

In both Honors World Literature courses, we focused on fairy tales. For their projects, I gave students the freedom to explore fairy tales in a number of different forms: oral traditions, print stories, and film adaptations. The information and ideas presented encompassed different theoretical approaches that ran the gamut from cultural studies to feminist and psychoanalytic theory to historical contexts. Several students compared fairy tales, such as Cinderella, from several different cultures, including Russian and Chinese versions of the story, and they included in their projects images that illustrated the different roles of the Cinderella figure from these cultures. Others explored Disney's films of fairy tales, such as *Snow White* and *Beauty and the Beast*, alongside their textual counterparts, again adding images from the films and illustrations from storybooks. In their projects, students discussed the changing representations of the female characters. Others focused on the stories of Little Red Riding Hood, exploring the different representations of the main character and what those representations reveal about the cultures that produced them. What the students discovered and then presented in their projects was insightful, and they certainly provided more diverse information than I could have imparted through classroom lectures. We all gained knowledge and were exposed to new ideas through these projects.

From both classes, I found that the students' projects were indeed, as Landow suggests, like collages, an "art of assemblage" made up of texts that imparted ideas, images that illustrated those ideas, and music that aesthetically enhanced both the words and images, thus incorporating several of the creative arts in order to make

new kinds of connections. In addition, as Traub and Lipkin suggest, computer technology can free students to think, and through multimedia projects, students can break down the boundaries between academic disciplines. The multimedia projects allowed students to gain skills in computer technology and graphic design, while at the same time exploring and making connections between art, literature, and music. Multimedia web projects enable students to draw from the creative arts by having them work with words, images, and sounds. Thus through multimedia projects, students become "creative interlocutors" who "work across academic artistic boundaries" (Traub and Lipkin, 2000, 34). As Traub and Lipkin have also argued, "True creativity lies in the management of knowledge, not in the production of given objects of art or tomes of discourse" ("Creative Interlocutor" 35). Through these projects, students gathered knowledge and skills from several different disciplines and learned to exploit a technology that merges traditional text-based academic disciplines with the creative arts.

Conclusion

As a teacher, I wanted to find projects that would engage and challenge my Honors students. These multimedia projects did just that. The knowledge they gained went far beyond what I could have imparted. The students were engaged in their projects and enjoyed seeking the information and resources they needed: critical sources, paintings, book illustrations, and musical accompaniment. They learned skills in web design and computer technology. More importantly, they completed and presented their projects with pride in their accomplishments.

Assigning multimedia projects in a course does, however, require a strong commitment from students and teachers, as well as flexibility and patience from both. As mentioned earlier, class time needs to be set aside for teaching the technology and for discussions about web design and non-linear writing. Technical support is also needed for setting up the sites and for technical trouble shooting when things don't go right. Students who have little or no computer experience need individual help and reassurance. To address the lack of computer experience on the part of some students, I assigned group projects for the fall of 2001 class. In each group, I ensured that at least one member had some experience with creating web pages or had sufficient experience with computers or was generally confident using technology. This approach worked well, and I was pleased with the team approach of group members helping each other to create the projects. The group projects allowed students to negotiate responsibilities and utilize the strengths of individual members, as well as to produce projects that reflected collaborative creativity. From a teaching standpoint, I too had to negotiate my role in the classroom. I became a facilitator and consultant. As the students worked on their projects, I moved among the groups answering questions about strategies of content organization, resources that might be useful, issues of page design, placement of images, and how to make a table and insert a graphic. Thus the project required me to go beyond the traditional role of providing content. I, along with my students, had to learn the technology and the conventions of multimedia. I must say that learning new skills was time consuming and that

shifting my role in the classroom often required rethinking pedagogical strategies, but as teachers we are confronted by a current and future world that we too have to learn to negotiate our way through, both technologically and pedagogically.

Concerning the future, Gunter Kress suggests that the "task is to provide young people with dispositions, knowledges and skills they will need" ("'English' at the Crossroads" 66). He also calls upon us "to open up full and productive access to the multiplicity of representational and communicational potentials, which will be essential for competent practice in the electronic age, in the societies and economies of the near future" (86). I believe that including multimedia projects in Honors courses provides students not only with computer skills, but also with the critical thinking skills they will need to prosper in the electronic age. As Traub and Lipkin assert, "[T]he traditions of a learning environment must re-engage the radical realities brought by electrical engineering and the imaging arts. The dialogue ought to be renewed in the discourse of communications creativity" ("If We Are Digital" 366). As teachers in Honors Programs, we need to look to the future and begin a dialogue discussing ways to use computer technology and ways to explore the potential of multimedia in our classrooms.

Note

Greg Wickliff and Kathleen Blake Yancey, in their article "The perils of creating a class Web site," have already begun the discussion. They co-taught a junior level, undergraduate honors course titled "Peace, War, Technology." A component of the course was a web-based "illustrative essay." They conclude that the "illustrated essay structure provided a halfway place for students to connect their strengths (reading and textual literacy) with new media and new ambitions—the visual argument" (186).

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[1] I do not mean to suggest here that analytical or traditional methods are "uncreative" in the broad sense. Critical or analytical functions at their best are intended to construct original thoughts, but such functions are not generally founded on the specific application of aesthetic and artistic sensibilities, the more narrow use of the term "creativity" that I wish to explore here.