

Hypertext: Composition and Critical Theory

The purpose of this grant is to enable the author to study and develop applications of hypertext in the teaching of writing.

Hypertext is a form of writing consisting of multiple sections (also known as "lexia", reading-unit), whose relations are nonlinear, multiple, and partially constructed by the reader. The most prominent example of hypertext writing is the World Wide Web, where links between pages and sites are created partly by the user. Different readers create varying combinations of lexia and links. Other hypertext forms exist as well, ranging from Web-based stories (such as the British trAce project, <http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/>) to narratives created by Eastgate Systems' Storyspace software (<http://www.eastgate.com/>), such as Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden* (<http://www.eastgate.com/catalog/VictoryGarden.html>) and Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl*. Most recently (2000), Mark Amerika's multimedia hypertext *Grammartron* (<http://www.grammartron.com/>) was awarded a showing at the prestigious Whitney Biennial.

The careful study of hypertext in a teaching environment is important for several reasons. First, as a form of composition, hypertext offers unique challenges and advantages. Writing non- or multi-linear works allows students to rethink linear logic in their writing. The empowerment of the reader (as each reading creates a different "reading", making the reader more of a collaborator and less a passive recipient) can enhance student awareness of texts. Hypertext's focus on links and connections changes the composition process, emphasizing internal and external associations. Second, many students already use hypertext in the form of the Web and some CD-ROM games. However, few have been equipped with the intellectual tools to reflect in an informed way on their experience, and hence cannot make full use of the medium. Third, as object of literary criticism, hypertext is vital. Critics and writers such as Michael Joyce, Janet Murray, George Landow, Sadie Plant, and Espen Aarseth have opened up an exciting field; much work remains to be done in understanding and especially teaching the potentials of this form.

I propose to investigate hypertext applications during the summer of 2001. My work will begin with a full survey of recent and current work in hypertext studies, building up a bibliography and set of materials aimed at student research usage. I will then study a series of hypertext works in different forms, from Storyspace texts to HTML-based narratives. Lastly, I plan to explore the possibilities of hypertext multimedia, starting from full-range Web sites (such as *Grammartron*) and ending with ActiveWorlds. These three-dimensional interactive environments easily enable hyperlinking and narrative (users become point of view characters, as in *Myst*), but have as yet not been developed for writing and "reading" purposes. My summer work will end with a set of teaching materials for the next academic year (2001-2002): selected hypertexts; critical readings; lesson plans; units within syllabi; assignments; at least one sample ActiveWorld text.

My hypertext project's technical requirements are already in place. Centenary College's network capabilities are sufficient for examining internet-based hypertext. I have access to a copy of Storyspace, for composition. My office and Centenary's labs offer adequate computing power, including secondary software (image scanners, basic sound editing, Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator).

Institutional support is similarly sufficient, as Centenary's IT staff is skilled at handling the few technical problems associated with hypertext (network connections, applications installation, etc.). I foresee no need for a stay at the ACS center at Southwestern.

This project will be integrated into college curricula in several ways. First, hypertext will appear as a major composition tool in the first-year writing sequence (Rhetoric 101-102). Students will explore the possibilities of writing through hyperlinked Web pages. The aim of this exploration is twofold: to increase thoughtful awareness of this important form, while enhancing key - and traditional - aspects of student writing, including linear logic, argument flow, use of evidence, internal organization. Second, there will be a large hypertext unit in English/Communication 252: Multimedia Writing and Literature. Students in this course (typically sophomores and juniors) will explore the form as literary subject and composition tool. This unit will connect to the course's unit on virtual environments through the use of an ActiveWorlds exploration. Third, an upper-level seminar, Cyberculture, will explore the productive intersections of hypertext and contemporary literary theory through a mix of all of these forms, plus research and creative

work. Fourth, on a similar topic, but at an introductory level, Centenary's new English course on literary methods will explore hypertext as a testing ground for initial studies of literary theory and criticism. Fifth, a course or minicourse on hypertext has been suggested by Centenary students and faculty; this summer project would enable me to make an informed proposal. All of these integrations are consonant with Centenary College's commitment to new media, and in particular with the English Department's leading role in the study of cyberculture.

Several assessment methods are available, emphasizing the unique potentials of hypertext as well as its effects on student perception of more traditional forms. One is to compare student writing in a traditional essay form with hypertext compositions, then with linear essays written by students immersed in hypertext work. Logical sequence, argument flow, and global organization can be readily assessed. Another is to assign a series of short writings about hypertext documents read over part or all of a semester. Awareness of the form can be assessed, then compared with similar writings on non-hypertext readings (i.e., does student perception of external reference change? how does the reader respond to different narrative organizations?). A third is to offer a series of hypertext tests, which present students with a series of unlinked lexia on topics from the course. Each test would measure how many and what kind of links students made within a set time; the assessment would chart if and how that associative thinking changed over time. Lastly, part of the goal of this summer project is to study current discussions of hypertext assessment.

The summer hypertext project would enhance my teaching and student learning on several levels, some of which I address in the preceding paragraphs. Generally, it would enhance my skills and knowledge of this aspect of new media. It would enable me to develop a set of teaching materials on hypertext as literary object, which has different uses in several courses. Developing strategies and materials for teaching writing through hypertext will increase the effectiveness of my writing classes. Hypertext as a tool for approaching contemporary literary theory is a powerful mechanism and one whose acquisition would benefit both my students and myself. Literary theory is a difficult topic, and students appreciate multiple approaches to it; similarly, many humanities students are intimidated by communications technology, but become better able to use new media if contextualized and theorized. (Sherry Turkle has written most famously about this process in her *Life on the Screen*)

I plan to evaluate the effectiveness of these hypertext strategies during the summer of 2002. At that point I will have a full academic year of assessment materials to work with. During the 2001-2002 period I will also solicit advice and feedback from experts in the field, including hypertext authors, critics, and ACS technology specialists. Also available will be the accumulation of student work in seven classes. I will check these outputs against my assessments, looking for improvements in the assessment categories, while comparing results with current publications on hypertext and teaching.

The results of this project are potentially useful to a variety of audiences, and can readily be shared. If hypertext is proven to enhance first-year student writing, it can be applied to all sections of the Rhetoric 101-102 course sequence. Since Centenary interests itself in improving writing across the curriculum, other instructors teaching composition and research papers may want to try out hypertext methods. Since Storyspace is a program with some degree of learning curve, I hope to hold workshops on using that application for my Centenary colleagues. Other English and composition faculty in ACS schools should find portions of my hypertext materials useful. I would glad collaborate with individuals. Following the example of several traveling faculty (Classics professors, Jimmy Purser's flying technology workshops come to mind), I'd be happy to visit a campus to hold hypertext workshops. If enough interest is evident, I will apply to organize a summer ACS workshop on the subject. Lastly, since much of my students' writing is Webbed and available for general browsing, colleagues interested in assessing the utility of hypertext in their own teaching have quick access to a ready and rich sample.

In short, I think this will be an attractive, rewarding, and exciting project. I hope you'll support it, and am ready to answer any questions.

Selected sources:

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