

THE OPHELIA PROJECT: A MULTIMEDIA SHAKESPEARE SITE

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In both sophistication and frequency, the use of computer-based instructional technology in humanities courses at the University of Windsor lags far behind the level of implementation found in science and mathematics courses, a trend that has been found elsewhere (Grégoire, Bracewell and Laferrière, 1996). As part of an attempt to overcome this lag, the Ophelia Project was developed as a demonstration site for the University's Virtual Lecture Hall, a flexible method of delivering multimedia presentations to learners by Internet or Intranet or CD-ROM, which enables faculty to present classes on-line with voice narration integrated with graphics, text, and digital video and audio clips. The aim of the project was twofold: (1) to develop a site which provides students with a stimulating and challenging on-line learning opportunity in a core area of humanities content; and (2) to demonstrate to faculty the immense potential in computer-based technologies to facilitate and enrich learning in ways that are entirely compatible with the goals of traditional teaching in the humanities.

The Ophelia project uses a variety of network technologies including, a standard html Web server, a streaming media server, an audio conferencing application and a Java audio recording applet. Although the technology is complex, most of the complexity happens behind the scenes. The technology is made to appear as transparent as possible. The primary user interface is an Internet browser used to access the main Ophelia Web site. Within the site, multimedia resources including audio, video and graphics are streamed to students over high speed and regular telephone connections to the Internet. Interactive student exercises are made possible by a Java applet that allows students to make and submit voice recordings. An audio conferencing application is used to allow students to collaborate and submit recorded dialogue. The tools required by students are free and they are easily installed.

A major strength of computer-based technology is its capacity to provide students with much wider access to instructional resources than can readily be offered through conventional classroom teaching. The Ophelia Project makes use of this capacity to engage students in an exploration of how the comparatively minor character of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has evolved into a complex cultural icon that continues to stimulate thought and artistic creation. After establishing contemporary interest in Ophelia, the site takes students through a gallery of

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paintings that demonstrate how visual artists have represented her image in profoundly contrasting ways, and then encourages the students to use these images, and others available by Internet, to think constructively about their own views of Ophelia. Then, the site goes on to illustrate by means of video clips how these contrasting views of Ophelia have given rise to widely differing performances on stage and on film. Finally, the site takes the students' analysis of Ophelia into the realm of dance by showing how she has been realized in the *Hamlet* ballet choreographed to the music of Shostakovich. Ophelia is thus established and examined as a figure of wide and continuing cultural interest.

In addition to calling for written responses to a number of learning activities, the site attempts to involve students in activities that are in line with current approaches to the teaching of Shakespeare. The basic premise of these approaches is that students should engage the plays as performance texts to be acted rather than simply read (Gibson, 1998; Riggio, 1999). In its fullest form performance-oriented teaching involves students in acting, directing, and producing substantial parts of a Shakespearean play, if not the entire work. More commonly, however, it leads to such practices as reading scenes aloud from different interpretive points of view and conducting comparative analyses of scenes recorded on tape or film. The Ophelia Project incorporates some key elements of this current approach in two ways. First, on the basis of the video clips provided, the students are asked to examine how several notable productions of *Hamlet* have portrayed Ophelia in the central scene of her relationship with Hamlet, the Nunnery Scene (*Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene I), and to analyze these performances in terms of the opposing views of Ophelia that have evolved through time. Second, the site calls for students to perform their readings of critical moments from the play involving Ophelia. While it would be foolish to suggest that the site makes possible the rich interaction between students and dramatic text that can ideally be attained in the classroom, it is nevertheless true that it does take students separated in time and space some of the way in that direction, and that it does offer a challenging interpretive activity of a form that is still all too rare in conventional classroom. For individual performance reading, the site makes novel use of the CARLA (Computer-assisted Recorded Language Assessment) Software created by Janet Flewelling and Donald Snider at the University of Windsor. Developed to enable foreign language instructors to assess the oral language performance of their students (Flewelling and Snider, 2001), CARLA can also be used to deliver one side of a dramatic dialogue for the students to respond to in character. An instructor can then listen to the entire recorded dialogue and provide feedback on the student's performance. The site also makes use of Windows Netmeeting to enable students working in pairs to develop differing interpretations of critical scenes from the play involving Ophelia.

Another acknowledged strength of computer-based technology is its ability to permit learners to progress at their own pace, and to pursue their own questions as they arise along the way. The site takes advantage of this strength in two distinct ways. First, it allows students to return to any segment of the narrative line and its

supporting graphics at any time for clarification or further thought. Second, it provides a great many explanatory and enriching links that enable students to go more deeply into references which they may personally find puzzling or interesting, and to do so if and when they see fit. The claim has been advanced that user-friendly technology can reduce anxiety by creating a non-judgmental and non-threatening learning environment (Grégoire, Bracewell and Laferrière, 1996), and it is worth noting in this regard that many students sit silent in conventional classrooms unwilling to risk embarrassment by interrupting the flow of the lesson to pursue exactly the kind of concerns that the Ophelia Project site enables them to explore freely.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (1993) propose that learning technologies should be designed to allow contributions that are either publicly accessible or private. Such a design feature grants learners access to the work of others and enables them to compare their ideas and build knowledge together, but also provides a workspace for private reflection. In keeping with this suggestion, students working through the learning activities of the site assemble a portfolio of written and oral submissions that can be made public, either anonymously or credited, for discussion among the participants in the course, or used privately for further thought. In final form, the portfolio can be used for purposes of evaluation and comment by the instructor.

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